

“WE GOTTA GET OUT OF THIS PLACE”: A QUALITATIVE STUDY
ON THE EFFECTS OF LEISURE TRAVEL ON THE LIVES OF GAY
MEN LIVING IN A SMALL COMMUNITY

A Thesis

by

SERGIO LINO HERRERA

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF SCIENCE

December 2003

Major Subject: Recreation, Park, and Tourism Sciences

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ABSTRACT

“We Gotta Get Out of This Place”: The Effects of Leisure Travel in the
Lives of Gay Men Living in a Small Community.

(December 2003)

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A feminist point of view is used in this study of gay men living in a small, collegiate community who use leisure travel as a negotiation strategy to achieve freedom of expression. Feminism is concerned with equality, empowerment, social change, the elimination of invisibility and the distortion of situated experiences. Feminist research is no more defined by the sex of the researcher than by the sex of the researched.

Several in-depth interviews were conducted with key informants who revealed the complex nature of how many gay men pursue leisure experiences that are affirming to their gay self-identities in “Soledad.” While gay meeting places and people exist in this small community, they remain mostly covert and invisible. Leisure travel to larger cities was a major negotiation strategy used to escape the stifling, hetero-normative community in which they lived. Escaping perceived hostilities was essential for gay men to feel comfortable exploring their homosexuality in a positive, affirming manner.

Furthermore, the benefits of leisure travel bled into the daily lives of gay men after leisure travel was performed. For instance, leisure travel helped gay men make other gay friends who helped them cope with their homosexuality, and, in the process, they helped them “learn” how to be gay. The skills and experiences these gay men acquired while pursuing leisure in other places helped them transform their daily lives and home community into a more bearable place to live, thereby making home an easier place to negotiate. Gay men were able to discover a whole new set of possibilities of how to express themselves and discovered a new “gaze” by which to view the world.

This research adds to the literature on travel and tourism, while expanding the information we have concerning the gay subculture that is becoming more socially and politically efficacious and economically powerful. Likewise, some of the gaps in the literature concerning leisure constraints and negotiation are also filled by this research.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to all of the wonderful people who have helped open my eyes to unique perspectives of thinking about the world and new ways of living, caring, laughing, and appreciating life. Life, as I have come to learn from these people, is what you make of it. I am embarking on a journey that will be rich and memorable due to the impressions of the folks that have taken time to talk to me and share a part of themselves with me.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

An understanding of entry and restrictions on space is absolutely central to understanding how and why certain places can and cannot be used for leisure.
-Skeggs, 1999

To summarize, empirical evidence suggests that narrowly-defined and perhaps inappropriate measures have been used as criterion variables to assess the impact of leisure constraints.

-Nadirova, A. and E. L. Jackson, 2000

The transformation of leisure research resulting from feminism includes acknowledging alternative views on questions asked and the research designs used.
-Henderson and Bialeschki, 1992

Although the idea of equal access to leisure and freedom of expression may be taken for granted by members in the mainstream of society, there exists a large number of individuals within sub-groups (or subcultures) in our society whose needs, experiences, and preferences are largely invisible outside his or her own social group and who face major obstacles to achieving desired leisure experiences. Every individual, regardless of his or her age, race, culture, religion, sexual preference, or level of ability has the right to freedom of choice in his or her pursuit of leisure. Yet, the experience and leisure needs of many marginalized groups are largely overlooked in contemporary literature and research. Feminist researchers will agree with the idea that much of the research before the 1990s has not de-centered from many of the white, heterosexual, male standards.

This thesis follows the format and style of the *Journal of Leisure Research*.

However, this does not mean that leisure is unimportant in the lives of members in other social categories.

On the whole, major social groups have given little attention to gays and lesbians. Therefore, this study will present a description and analysis of the leisure experiences of gay men who live in a rural, southern community, named “Soledad”. More specifically, this research will shed light on the leisure constraints, and negotiations of those constraints, of gay men living in Soledad. Their main negotiation strategy to overcoming a lack of opportunities to find expressive, affirming leisure outlets was leisure travel, a popular activity for gay men, as well as many other sub-groups. Other pertinent aspects of gay men’s lives and experiences will also be covered.

With the increased rhetoric on cultural diversity and equality, sexual orientation is starting to come to the forefront of issues facing many disciplines. More gay and lesbian persons are acknowledging their sexual orientation as homosexuality, as this sexual orientation becomes increasingly tolerated in our society. Likewise, it is increasingly recognized that sexual orientation is a factor in the styles and associations developed around leisure activity that can be central to the formation of a variety of leisure subcultures (Johnson, 1999). An increased understanding of the concerns surrounding gay and lesbian people can enhance the leisure of individuals of non-dominant and dominant sexual orientations and allow them to construct positive, self-expressive leisure experiences (Johnson, 1999).

This research aims to provide a voice detailing how gay men negotiate their unique constraints to leisure using leisure travel as a major negotiation strategy. Leisure

travel is an important avenue for identity development for many members in the homosexual community. Understanding these processes can possibly increase understanding and acceptance from society's dominant groups, while helping these marginalized groups travel with less conflict and constraints. At the same time, understanding gay men's experiences may help increase awareness of the constraints and negotiation strategies of other sub-groups that have historically fallen outside the gaze of leisure studies.

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative research was to discover the leisure constraints that gay men, living in a somewhat rural community, encounter. Furthermore, this research details the negotiation strategies employed by these men to overcome these constraints.

Statement of the Problem

This study was conducted in a qualitative approach that aimed to collect data related to gay men's perceptions of constraints and negotiations. Skeggs (1999) stated that qualitative research, "relies on a variety of different methods combined over time to produce the fullest picture possible of the processes under study (p.217)." For the purpose of this study, an interactionist paradigm was chosen as a means for understanding the meanings of events that comprise the context of day-to-day life (Denzin, 2001). The three basic assumptions that ground the interactionist approach are: people act out toward things based on the meanings these things have for them; meanings

arise out of social interaction; and meanings are modified through an interpretive process that involves self-reflective individuals symbolically interacting with one another, interpreting each other's actions (Blumer, 1969). Essentially, the belief is that people create the worlds of experience in which they live. They interpret the events and actions that comprise their lives based on past experiences and current meanings derived from social interaction. This perspective relies on the assumption that the individual is the final authority in subjective experience. With these concepts in mind, this study was designed to allow participants the ability to create their reality of the relationship between leisure and personal constraints, so that a more personal understanding of their experience can be derived.

Furthermore, a feminist point of view is used throughout this study. This philosophical perspective is concerned with the equality, empowerment, and social change of women, and the elimination of invisibility and distortion of their experiences (Henderson, Bialeschki, Shaw, & Freysinger, 1996). However, Bleier (1988) adds to feminism's utility and scope by suggesting that feminists seek to recreate a science that will benefit women as well as other oppressed groups, which includes gay men. Feminist scientists seek to recognize the broader complexity of the natural world, including individual human nature. Feminism was a useful framework for this study because it provides alternative viewpoints on the issue of leisure constraints and negotiation during gay men's travel, as well as different ways to study related issues. Feminist research is no more defined by the sex of the researcher than by the sex of the researched; feminist researchers put the experience of women and/or the construction of gender as the focus of

analysis but this focus does not necessarily mean that only women are studied. Feminist research serves as a critique of existing research, a correction of the biases that have existed, and provides a groundwork for the transformation of social science and society.

Research Questions

There were two basic research questions that guided this research.

1. What constraints to leisure do gay men cite?
2. How do gay men negotiate these constraints?

Definitions

Operational definitions of terms used in this study are as follows.

Leisure constraints alter the way participation occurs in intensity, enjoyment, or means of achievement. Scott (in press) defines constraints as, “Factors that limit people’s participation in leisure activities, people’s use of leisure services, or people’s enjoyment of current activities.” Constraints impact individuals before a preference to participate is formed, when interacting with others, and once a desire to participate has been established. Leisure constraints must be negotiated, at least partially, if leisure involvement is to occur.

Negotiation of leisure constraints is defined as a behavioral and/or cognitive strategy that will lead an individual to participate in the leisure activity, although participation may be modified in some aspect.

Leisure travel is defined as travel away from one's home for the purpose of vacation, sightseeing, relaxation, or visiting one's friends or family. The amount of time to reach one's destination, the means by reaching one's destination, or amount of time spent during travel is not necessarily important to this study, since people conceptualize leisure time and travel in different manners.

A gay man is defined as an adult, of at least eighteen years of age, who identifies his sexual orientation as homosexual. A homosexual orientation is the condition of having a preference, emotionally and sexually, towards members of the same sex. As an orientation, homosexuality becomes a characteristic of the individual, coloring his human relationships and his subjective interpretation of the world around him. The researcher would prefer not to use any labeling nouns or adjectives that imply that a gay man's sexual feelings are the most important aspect of his identity.

Limitations

The study was limited by several constraining factors. First, the study is limited by the relative small number of key informants, therefore it is not intended to describe the experiences of all gay men. The reader should be cautioned against concluding that the culture of the group studied is representative of the entire gay sub-culture. Second, much of the meaning of the interviews and participant observation may be skewed by the researcher's subjective view on the world and interpretation of the interviews. However, much of this work was supervised by and collaborated with other scholars in an attempt to keep the analyses scientific. Finally, the researcher's own inexperience in qualitative

research may have affected the data collection in the early stages of this research, during the analysis of data, and presentation of results.

Significance of the Study

This study will add to the leisure constraints and travel literature by filling in the gaps of previous research. This study will also add to the ever growing gay and lesbian literature. Scant attention has been given to gays and lesbians in the leisure literature in the past, therefore this research can serve as a guide to future ethnographic and qualitative research. Lastly, this research aims to give an insider's point-of-view and voice to the gay and lesbian community and experience.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

A review of the literature was intended to help the researcher grasp the broad notions of leisure constraints and negotiation strategies, while understanding previous work covering gay men and leisure travel.

Gay Subculture

Empirical research of the gay and lesbians group activities before the gay rights movement is lacking at best. Existing research focuses mostly on the whole gay population as a subject of deviance. It is also generally ignored that the homosexual population is not homogeneous, and not every gay person enjoys or pursues the same activities or holds the same motivations and morals. Regardless, the gay population as a whole is mobile and becoming politically efficacious.

A large segment of society still regards homosexuality as a deviant sexual preference, and because of this, being labeled a “deviant” is central to many gay men’s identities. Humphreys (1970) suggested that the least explored area of sociology of deviant behavior is exactly that how deviance is organized, and how the deviant activities are important to the individuals who engage in organized deviance. This still holds true today, because the homosexual subculture is strongly socially structured, and under-researched. There is a complex social life within the gay subculture that is only now revealing itself to researchers, and it is quite clear that the internal life of clubs and associations interact with this branding process (Hacking, 1986).

Goffman (1963) provided a detailed explanation of stigma and its processes. Generally, a feature of stigma is the question of what is called “acceptance”; in other words, there are contaminated aspects of one’s social identity that lead others to treat him or her differently. For example, Adelman (1990) provided research on the power of stigma on the adjustment and interaction patterns of gays and lesbians who are 60 years and older, who lived a majority of their lives before the gay rights movement. Adelman discovered common methods of these older adult’s disclosure patterns and how they were interacted with other gays. The results demonstrated the powerful influence of the social environment and stigma on their covert gay activities and culture. Adelman suggested that considering adjustment and involvement with other gay people, high life satisfaction was related to low involvement with other gays, and vice-versa. He claimed that this trend was not surprising if we consider socio-historical factors. Other studies have supported this notion, but this may be less true for today’s generations because social acceptance of gays and lesbians is on the rise; the stigmatization of homosexuality has declined.

In an earlier study similar to Adelman’s 1990 study, Humphreys (1970) tearoom studies demonstrated a need for low disclosure and low involvement within the covert, hidden homosexual culture for men participating in tearoom activities. His analysis highlighted one aspect of all tearoom interaction: the protection of the identities of the participants in the gathering. He discovered that the highly constrained interaction within the tearoom is a function not only of the desire of the participants to limit their involvement with each other, but also a function of stigmatization of this activity.

Therefore, this covert sexual activity appeared to initially constrain, not enhance, the functioning of gay men in earlier decades. Today there are more opportunities to socialize freely, making the decision to participate in such covert, stigmatized activities less of a non-issue. Kivel (1994) suggested that gay and lesbians, “like their non-gay peers, enjoy participating in leisure activities. Further, they want opportunities to socialize with their peers in safe and supportive environments (p.26).” In other words, stigma constrains gay and lesbian people while pursuing leisure and satisfying lifestyles.

In discussing the influence of an open, affirming subculture in helping closeted gay men mediate their relationship with the larger society, Humphreys (1970) believed that the ultimate social and psychological adjustment of the homosexual will be conditioned by the structure of the role opportunities provided by the homosexual community. Those who are forced into covert adaptation by society are denied these opportunities.

Gay subcultures, however, as we know them today, were unavailable to the generation of older gay people and therefore they had few opportunities to socialize to form more a positive identification with other gay people. However, the closets of the era before the Stonewall Riots provided comfort in the hostile, social environment by allowing gay men and women to maintain a positive self-image. Today, the closet may not provide this comfort and not allow gay men and women to maintain positive self-images, because more gay people are coming out of the closet and encouraging their gay friends to do the same.

An important factor in the emergence and development of gay and lesbian subcultures was the urbanization that occurred during the industrial revolution which created the social space for a gay subculture. Urban areas facilitated group cohesion, and by mid-century gay subcultures were established in most major cities (Epstein, 1987). Within these large cities, gay men and women started joining together to fight the narrow, mainstream thoughts and morals that dominated society. The rich gay history that is found in larger metropolitan areas makes sense considering Sinfield's study (1997) that explained how urban gay cultures are the most powerful in helping people come out of the closet and deal with their sexuality. The journey out of the closet seems to be easier in urban areas, because coming out of the closet is a journey of "discovery" about the gay world (Altman, 1971). In order to discover the gay world, one has to visit the areas where it is found.

In the 1950s and 1960s, a constructionist ideology dominated activist groups. These groups portrayed homosexuals as revolutionary figures who were uniquely situated to advance the cause of sexual liberation for society as a whole (Epstein, 1987). Activists desired the disappearance of constraining categories, like the "homosexual" and the "heterosexual." Interestingly, it was not the constructionist approach that brought about growth in the gay subculture, but rather the essentialist labeling practices of physicians and psychiatrists. These labeling practices allowed stigmatized lesbians and gays to gradually begin organizing around and asserting the legitimacy of their identity (Foucault, 1978), just as blacks could not fight the arbitrariness of racial classification without organizing as blacks. Gays could not make room for themselves in society (and

the sexual order) without making their gayness the very basis of their identity (Epstein, 1987). These constructionist goals and movements, in some ways, are still being fought today.

Gay Men and Leisure Travel

During the beginning of the 20th century to World War II, there were several gay subcultures developing, which ranged from New York, Paris, and Berlin. However, gay travel during this era remained an elitist activity, primarily reserved for the rich who could afford to travel. In today's society, the mass tourism of gay people is commonplace, opening up a new range of possibilities for these distinct gay subcultures to mix and communicate with each other. Likewise, mass tourism has helped gay people become more accepted by society, and even sought after and prized by locales wishing to boost tourism.

The growth of gay neighborhoods, or queer districts, occurred during the Second World War and the urban social upheaval that came in its wake. According to Wright (1999), U.S. troops used New York City and San Francisco as ports, allowing gay men and women to sample the gay urban subcultures found there. This mobile group contributed to the rise of both of these cities as major, gay centers after the troops returned from war (Wright, 1999). The homosexual subcultures in New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco had developed into important communities by the 1950s and 1960s. This era witnessed gay milestones, like the arrival of some of the earliest gay and lesbian publications, found in Los Angeles. San Francisco boasted of the first openly gay

person to ever run for political office. According to Romesburg (2001), the New York League for Sexual Freedom held what might be the first public gay rights demonstration in 1964. Of course, while these events do not indicate that travel between these major cities was frequent, they do demonstrate that these communities as important centers for the gay population.

The queer districts that are now renowned in the psyches of gays and lesbians were highly developed by the late 1960s. Queer districts like the Castro, West Hollywood, Greenwich Village, and South Beach, became important gay centers to the homosexual subculture in the U.S. Joined with smaller resort destinations like Provincetown, MA, Key West, FL, and Fire Island, NY, there was a growing set of choices for gay men and lesbians to visit and be open about their sexuality (Newton, 1995).

However, gay travel during this era might could be described as self-segregation (Clift, Luongo, & Callister, 2002), because gays may have felt safer visiting this handful of gay-safe places. Much of the leisure travel for gays consisted of trips to the gay enclaves. For gays living outside the larger cities, travel allowed them to leave behind their constrained daily routines and enter into a gay environment. This assertion was found to be true in this thesis. In light of the times, it was the safest way for gays and lesbians to travel (Clift, et al., 2002). The very existence of these gay spaces provided identity and hope for gay men and women, even for those that did not travel to them; gay people do not have to visit such spaces in order to be influenced by them (Bailey, 1999).

There are several indications that travel to gay districts and travel by gay people was on the rise. The creation of gay travel books is just one indication that a more formal structure was developing in the gay subculture. By the 1960s, gay travel clubs had begun to take trips all over the world, including to some non-gay spaces (Clift, et al., 2002). As gay travel continued to grow it remained separate from traditional travel until the 1980s. According to Clift et al., by the 1990s there was a noticeable shift from previous travel and vacation trends, particularly in the generations coming after the age of HIV epidemic and the gay liberation movement. Some of the reasons for changes in travel tastes and preferences were social, while other reasons were economic.

One of the reasons why gay travel rates were on the rise was the growing social equality and acceptance of gays in the United States and Britain (Clift, et al., 2002). As gay and lesbian rights progressed, gay men and women no longer seemed to feel the need to confine themselves only to all-gay environments. Also, it was during the 1990s when locales noticed that gay rights marches and other organized events were lucrative tourist events. Coupled with increasingly positive media images of gays and lesbians, corporations and the tourism industry aimed to capitalize on the gay population. According to Holcombe and Luongo (1996), the early 1990s significant economic slowdown fueled a search for “recession proof” market niches, and the gay population seemed to be a logical choice. The mainstreaming of gay and lesbian tourism changed the nature of how businesses advertised towards the gay population.

However, the gay subculture had developed the “circuit party” system, which was at the opposite end of sexual mainstreaming. Circuit parties were large, excessive parties

designed to raise money to fight AIDS. Circuit parties also helped create the image of a gay destination in the cities that hosted them. According to Clift et al., the creation of a city as a gay destination is most apparent with Miami's White Party. Circuit Parties have become huge annual events in some cities. For instance, New Orleans hosts the largest gay Halloween celebration, which rivals Mardi Gras in terms of gay tourists visiting the area. However, circuit parties have come under political and social criticism since illegal drug use is rampant at circuit parties, and "partying" promotes unsafe sex and other unhealthy habits. Regardless, future studies on such circuit parties are needed to explore the dynamics involved and the effects on tourism. Generally, more studies on gay and lesbian travel is needed in order to fortify the work that has been completed. With gays and lesbians traveling around the globe, and fewer of them basing their decisions solely on gay-related issues, the literature may soon find itself outdated.

Graham's Categories of Tourism

Research that I found extremely helpful is the work done by Graham. Graham (2002) wrote from an anthropological framework and categorized tourism into three broad overlapping classes: homosexual tourism, gay tourism, and queer tourism. His purpose in creating these overlapping categories was to show how they help maintain or disrupt the heterosexual-homosexual dichotomy. However, I found the three categories useful in other ways, mainly in helping conceptualize the different ways in which gays travel. Graham described "homosexual tourism" as the most marginal form of tourism that gays and lesbians have indulged in for decades. Homosexual tourism consists of

visiting gay centers away from home, or locales that tolerate gays, in order to feel safe and allow sexual freedom. “Gay tourism” is less marginal and celebrates gay culture within the boundaries of society, but this form of tourism maintains the heterosexual-homosexual dichotomy. “Queer tourism” celebrates gay culture and the co-history that pervades every day life, because queer tourism aims to undermine and deconstruct the sexual dichotomy. The forms of marginalization that Graham presented come in geographic, social, and cultural forms.

Homosexual tourism is leisure travel to places on the edges or outside of mainstream society. Homosexual tourism utilizes the space that keeps “home” a relatively queer-free zone, because homosexual tourism utilizes areas away from home to explore sexuality. The main destinations pursued within homosexual tourism have been countries in which homosexuality has been tolerated in private, even while some forms of public display may be sanctioned. Homosexual tourism’s critical component lies in the opportunity it affords the gay traveler access a world not so “ruthlessly controlled by a hetero-normative regime” (Graham, 2002, p.35). Gay tourism is centered on the major urban gay enclaves, resorts and events of the gay calendar. In terms of physical distance, travel to these spaces may not be as geographically isolated, but they still may be marginalized socially, culturally and politically. Gay tourism is motivated by social, cultural and political concerns that are explicitly critical of hetero-normative regimes (Graham, 2002). Queer tourism takes place in the midst of the “straight” world. Queer tourism celebrates the queer history and people found through-out the entirety of society.

Gay and queer tourism are becoming more widely pursued as society's norms become more relaxed. These forms of tourism try to expand the visibility of gays and make their presence felt throughout society. For example, Graham (2002) pointed to the articles in the Sydney gay press about the Olympics and the gossip of pub patrons over certain (famous) athlete's sexuality that share the same goal of making the gay presence visible. Likewise, the drag queens in the Olympic closing ceremony made homosexuality very visible for the vast audience, but, as several commentators argued, it was a narrow form of visibility that depicted gay men in a negative light. The risk associated with this kind of visibility is that it reinforces the notion that gays and lesbians are qualitatively different from the mainstream.

All three of types of tourism that gay people undertake were categorized by Graham in order to analyze them critically. Graham believed that tourism performed by gay people involves searching for clues and confirmation of how the world really is, to find another truth, and evidence to the contrary; the three different categories can be seen as different degrees of how pro-active gay tourist's search is for discovering the gay world. All three categories rely on the notion that same-sex desire exists everywhere, but it may be hidden and covert, and not apparent to those who are not looking with the right lenses, or "gaze." As examples, Graham presented the homosexual tourist of the 18th and 19th century picking through the classical texts and Greek ruins for evidence of the "pederastic" tradition, the gay spectators at the Olympics who stripped away the heterosexual facade, and the queer tourist who searches for the co-presence of a queer heritage (Graham, 2002). All three forms of tourism show gay travelers as seekers of

experience that provide meaning in their lives. However, the idea of tourists as seekers of meaning and truth is not new.

It was MacCannell (1976) that originally stated that tourists are seekers of a meaningful whole in a modern world of fragmentation and change, in which people have been thrown together in the confusion of modernity. He argued that the act of sightseeing and touring is a kind of activity that helps the person fabricate meaning from his or her diversified experiences. He argued that tourism is a modern form of religious seeking and that tourists are modern pilgrims. However, their mission is doomed from the onset because tourism involves the celebration of differences, while it attempts to create a unified totality. Graham argued that homosexual and gay tourism are more successful in creating a unity or meaningful whole, because most gay travelers celebrate the unity of culture, identity and pleasure found in the gay capitals that they frequently visit.

MacCannell's understanding of modernity as fragmentation has also been tested by Graham's work. For instance, Rojek (1995) pointed out in a discussion of leisure that modernity is not only chaos, but it is also about order and discipline, like the homosexual-heterosexual dichotomy that places people into categories. Graham contended that queer tourism does not seek to create order, but rather, it aims to dismantle the hetero-normative sexual order. This dismantling, however, is also form of sense-making, but it differs from the kind MacCannell has in mind, Graham argued.

Travel to an unfamiliar destination in order to experience its novelty is one of the main goals of tourism. Queer tourism's mantra of sexual co-presence does not necessarily rely on travel to far away places, because this co-presence can be found

within the tourist's familiar surroundings, i.e., at home. This absence for the need to travel any distance to be a tourist puts the common notion of travel and tourism as being the same phenomenon in jeopardy. For example, Urry's (1995) definition of tourism as being the movement to and from, and a stay in a destination for a limited time applies only to homosexual tourism and gay tourism, but is not necessarily true of queer tourism (Graham, 2002). The queer tourist can experience alternative dimensions of the space he lives within. In other words, the queer tourist can see a gay world overlapping the straight world where he or she visits. Graham believed that a gay person can "travel" from the straight world to the queer world because the queer signifiers are accessible to him, or the person possesses what I have come to call the "gay gaze." Once a gay person is able to see the world from gay/queer perspective, he or she will find it hard believing that that any other truth besides a heterosexual-homosexual co-presence true. The queer tourist will tell you that queer things, people, and spaces are always present within the routine heterosexual world. Queer tourists do not look at one space as two different spaces, but as differing interpretations of the same space.

Recognizing the "signs" and knowing the queer dimension of a site that is not immediately apparent is not so much as it is seeing something novel as seeing the everyday in a novel way (Graham, 2002). Tourists are also the collectors of gazes (Urry, 1995), but how do gay men and women collect gazes? And how do we as scholars study what is not there or can be seen? Graham believed that these points are secondary to the real issue at hand. He argued that the emphasis on tourism's visual dimension presents tourists as collectors only of gazes, and not cultural texts. The cultural text that a tourist

usually sees is prepackaged information, fortified with signs to help the tourist interpret the sights they see. But Graham argued that cultural texts are not only read, but produced, and those who are able to inscribe their version of the world into these cultural texts retain an advantage over the rest of society. The “culture as text” metaphor, associated with Geertz (1973), has been criticized for privileging the dominant group and their version of the world. Graham believed that culture is a series of textual products, but these products are ongoing productions that are interpreted with varying degrees of sophistication. The kind of interpretation that queer tourism utilizes does not accept prepackaged meaning. In fact, it does not see “tourist” sites as unchangeable texts that produced and framed for consumption, but it relies on the active interpretation and reproduction of what the cultural texts mean for those who see them. Due to this assertion, gay people may be more able to experience the world in unique ways.

Some Problems with Leisure Travel

The interest in targeting gay men as a market segment for tourism has risen dramatically over the past few decades, mostly because gay men are thought to be a high-income group with few dependents and with a lifestyle that is highly leisure-focused, resembling a recession proof niche (Hughes, 2002). Various surveys in the U.S., and in other countries, reported an above-average proportion of gays being in the upper social groups, earning above-average incomes, and being more likely than others to have additional vacation time (Jefferies, 1999; Wood, 1999). While it is relatively true that few gay men have children and therefore larger discretionary incomes, there are

fundamental problems with the characterizations of gay men as more likely to travel than straight people of a similar ages and occupations, for several reasons.

First, it is not easy to define homosexuality, or what it means to be gay (Sinfield, 1997). The common assumption is that sexual activity with same-sex partners defines homosexuality, however, there is a distinction between homosexual activity and homosexual orientation. Some men occasionally have same-sex partners, but may not identify as gay, while others identify themselves as gay, but may not be sexually active. Hughes (2002) believed that sexuality is ultimately a self-defined category, which is very fluid and open to change.

Many people will not admit to being homosexual and therefore will conceal this orientation from others. This invisibility of the gay population creates difficulties in ascertaining the exact size and composition of the gay population. The distinguishing characteristics of gay men used by mainstream society are no more than a reflection of the media and responses to broad surveys, which may be skewed, because the respondents are self-selecting (Hughes, 2002). The truth about gay people is that they mirror the rest of society in terms of age, class, ethnicity, and income; likewise, they can be found everywhere in society. Regarding the gay population as a homogeneous entity exclusively identified by sexual orientation is not wise for those entities wishing to market gays, because there are major demographic, attitudinal and ideological differences among gays (Hughes, 2002). Gays are also not homogeneous in terms of employment and income, and because of this, not all gays are high-income and able to take vacations. While it is relatively easy to segment markets by geography or demographics, it is not

easy to do so by sexuality (Hughes, 1997). It is not certain that gay men, as a whole, are a viable market segment (Fugate, 1993; Pritchard and Morgan, 1996).

A casual examination of the gay press and its vacation advertisements suggests that gay men are interested largely in sun, sea, and sex. There are clear sexual images in advertisements and some travel guides or brochures even give directions to where casual sex encounters occur. In general, much of the gay scene outwardly appears to be directed towards the pursuit of casual sex, but the image of promiscuity amongst homosexual is a misrepresentation of the reality of the lives of many gay men (Hughes, 2002). It is likely that the portion of gay men do not frequent the gay scene as often as the rest of society may think. According to Hughes, and supported in this research effort, some gay men find the scene to be over-commercialized and youth-oriented. Likewise, much of the gay scene at bars and clubs may be undesirable to portions of the gay population. This may help to explain the variety of bars and establishments from which a gay man can choose from in order to pick an atmosphere he identifies with.

Leisure travel for gay men is more than just the sex tourism that is depicted in the media. Gay leisure travel may be more usefully interpreted in terms of its contribution to the process of establishing an identity (Hughes, 1997). Hughes stated that for gays, sexuality may be a paramount dimension of identity formation. Being away from home gives opportunity to be gay in a way that many people cannot experience at home or at work. The nature of society has been such that it has been difficult for gay men to be open about their sexuality. Discrimination against gays has forced gay men to reinforce

their identity within exclusive leisure space (Hughes, 2002), as is the case in this study of gay men living in a small, southern town.

In some cases, push factors, like the desires to be oneself or be with others like oneself, cause gay men to construct and validate their identity away from home. These push factors also include concepts like social censure and stigma (Hughes, 2002). The push of the exclusion from mainstream society and the consequent need for the reassurance of the open and secure company of other gay men may be the biggest push factor for gay men. However, opportunities to be “gay” are limited. For the most part, Bell (1991) stated, some gay men are only able to be “gay” in gay space. Similarly, many gays may not frequent the local spaces where gays hang out because of the fear of being caught. This assertion was evident in the research that I have performed.

On the other hand, gay space can act as a pull factor. Gays not living near large, metropolitan areas may be forced to become tourists. Vacations away from home are extensions of a gay man’s need and desire to be away from social pressures associated with being a gay man. The significance of leisure travel may be even more important for gay men than it is for the mainstream segments of society, because leisure travel provides opportunities for gays to be themselves.

Nonetheless, gay men are likely to have reasons for going on vacation that are similar to those of the rest of the population (Hughes, 2002). Clift and Forest (1999) discovered that, for gay men, rest and relaxation, comfort and good food, and sunshine were the most important factors in “planning a holiday,” and may be no different from the average vacation planner. Clift and Forest’s survey respondents did, however,

consider it important to socialize with gay men and to access gay culture and venues, while opportunities to have sex were unimportant to a relatively large proportion. These surveys also pointed out some other problems that gay men experience during leisure travel.

Constraints during Leisure Travel

There remains a number of practical factors that serve to inhibit gay leisure travel. Although participation in tourism is common in our society, there are still large portions of the population who are unable or unwilling to travel (Hughes, 1991). Much of this non-participation arises from “internal” factors such as limited disposable income, the social and cultural relevance of the travel, because for some travel and leisure time are of little significance (Haukeland, 1990). While some believe that it is unlikely that these constraints are significant in the case of gay men, others believe that there may be other external impediments to travel that explain a lack of leisure travel. In fact, there is little known about how these particular constraints function during the processes gay leisure travel.

As noted already, many gay men seek destinations identified as gay space, and such gay-friendly places are limited, and therefore the destination set is limited for gays. The choice of travel destination may be constrained by the fact that homosexual relations are still illegal in some places and subject to social censure. Hughes reported (2002) that Amnesty International found, in 1997, that homosexual acts are illegal in 70 countries, including many Caribbean countries, many Middle Eastern countries, the countries of the

Indian sub-continent and several US states. Laws relating to public decency or public order may also be applied to demonstrations of affection. Punishments in some Islamic countries can be severe. However, laws are not always applied to tourists, and gay tourists are usually tolerated. Nonetheless, the censure of same-sex acts can give out negative signals to potential tourists. For many gays, the choice of where one will visit is limited to places where gays are tolerated.

Leisure travel can easily become a negative experience for gays if verbal or physical abuse, social disapproval or threatening behavior is experienced, expected or anticipated (White, 2000). These factors could result in levels of anxiety and apprehension that may not be experienced by gay's heterosexual counterparts. As Hughes noted (1997), gays experience more impediments to leisure travel, such as experiencing hostility within destinations from locals, other tourists, and service providers, like hotel and resort staff. Hughes (2002) also stated that leisure travel was also inhibited by perceptions of rejection and exclusion. Some gays noted that they had a fear of visiting rural areas, because they felt conspicuous. At the very least, the prospect of being the object of ridicule was sufficient reason to confine their leisure activities to familiar urban areas.

Destination choice may be more of a constrained endeavor for homosexual leisure travelers than it is for heterosexual counterparts, because of the significant more number of inhibitors in destination choice. Within destinations there may be further be inhibitors which restrict activity in terms of behavior and in terms of places visited. Leisure travel to some destinations may not be the liberating experience that was hoped for, because

many of the constraints experienced at home may also be evident during travel (Hughes, 2002). These experiences, real or perceived, feed into the leisure travel experience. Therefore, the anticipation of negative experiences can restrict behavior while during leisure travel, while simultaneously restricting destination choices.

Leisure Constraints

While pursuing leisure activities, whether at home or away from home, gay men can experience what has been termed “leisure constraints.” The concept of leisure constraints stems from several decades of research that has evolved since the 1950s, when the U.S. Congress acknowledged the need to perform a national analysis of recreation opportunities and problems. They established the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Committee (ORRRC), which consisted of Congressmen and citizens appointed by the president (Jensen, 1985). The reports from the ORRRC are recognized as the inaugural point that led to leisure constraints research (Goodale & Witt, 1989).

Leisure constraints was initially labeled recreation “barriers,” and research over these barriers focused on understanding group behaviors and forming a greater understanding of the role in the management and provision of recreation and natural resources for agencies, such as public Park and Recreation Departments. Early studies focused on demand for specific activities, but questions such as non-participation and barriers to participation were addressed as well. During the 1970s, the literature on barriers to recreation participation began to focus more on studies oriented towards individual’s recreation patterns, partially due to an interest in understanding individuals

with special needs (Crawford & Godbey, 1987). Understanding their barriers was important in order to remove obstacles; many studies related to barriers during this era have origins firmly rooted in recreation of a therapeutic nature.

According to Jackson (1988), much of the research up to this time was fragmented and used poor measures of the variables studied. Due to its relative infancy and the rapid growth of literature, the understanding of barriers lacked clarity and scholars continued to produce research that was conceptualized in many different ways. Therefore, research after this era helped redefine the concept of barriers to recreation, because it helped clarify concepts and develop better measures of variables. Furthermore, government agencies felt pressure to be more accountable in fulfilling their mandate of the provision of recreation services. In response, public and quasi-public strategies changed, incorporating information about non-participation and barriers, hoping this could justify their efforts and services to decision-makers and governments. These changes helped close the gap between the academic and applied conceptualizations of barriers. Future research became more dynamic and developed.

While the diversity of studies concerning barriers during the first half of leisure constraints research lacked commonalties, it can be viewed as positive, because diversity within the research and broad perspectives on this phenomenon did not conform to one line of thought. However, a consolidation of research was needed in order to avoid the continued fragmentation and undirected accumulation of empirical data (Jackson, 1988). However, despite all of the differences in early studies, they all share the notion that “constraints inhibit people’s ability to participate in leisure activities, to spend more time

doing so, to take advantage of leisure services, or to achieve a desired level of satisfaction,” (Jackson, 1988, p.213).

The growing literature during the 1980s continued to refine and consolidate previous research. Likewise, this era is associated with the change in terminology associated with barriers to recreation participation. “Barriers to recreation” was gradually replaced with “leisure constraints.” Constraints were generally accepted to include any factor that affected leisure participation negatively, either in terms of preventing participation, reducing the frequency, intensity or duration, or reducing the quality of the experience or satisfaction gained from the activity (Goodale & Witt, 1989; Jackson, 1988). Another characteristic of previous research is that it rarely focused on concepts like race, gender, income, and sexuality. Likewise, there was need to develop conceptual models.

One of the larger obstacles to advancing the body of knowledge about leisure constraints was the variations in the types of items that had been studied previously (Jackson, 1988). The lack of consistency among research studies resulted in the need of overarching conceptual classifications to help scholars better conceptualize their attempts to understand leisure constraints. The most common conceptual classification used was “internal” and “external” constraints. Internal constraints referred to constraints within an individual, such as lack of interest or lack of skill, while external constraints referred to factors attributed to the environment, such as lack of transportation or lack of facilities.

Increasingly, there was a growing agreement that leisure constraints could be best understood in the context of models that specified why people do what they do and what

they derive from their efforts. Three proposed models were developed: Jackson and Searle's (1985) decision-making model; Crawford and Godbey's (1987) proposed model for leisure participation; and Henderson, Stalnaker and Taylor's (1988) introduction of antecedent constraints within the model of leisure participation.

Jackson and Searle's model was conceptualized as the reduction of alternatives to leisure engagement. Two types of barriers were proposed from this conceptualization: those barriers that block participation and preclude leisure engagement, and those which limit, but do not preclude leisure engagement. This model helped define the linkages that exist between the non-participatory and the participation aspects of an individual's recreation behavior. This occurs by examining both aspects simultaneously in the context of the choices that one makes about recreation (Jackson and Searle, 1985).

Crawford and Godbey's model included three types of constraints: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural. Intrapersonal constraints refer to internal factors that affect preferences or lead to a lack of interest. Self-confidence, for example, can stymie preferences. Likewise, lack of encouragement or disapproval from others can limit preferences (Henderson, Bialeschki, Shaw, & Freysinger, 1996). Interpersonal constraints are associated with relationships with other people, which may affect both preferences and behavior. For example, lack of partners may prevent individuals from participating in activities that require companion (Henderson, et al., 1996). Likewise, a partner may motivate a person to change his or her preferences. Structural constraints can be seen as these factors that intervene between preference and participation. These

examples may include lack of facilities or programs, lack of time or money, and a lack of transportation.

Crawford and Godbey's 1987 study raised the possibility that different types of constraints may be interrelated (Jackson, Crawford, & Godbey, 1993). Their work attempted to conceptually address the issue of leisure constraints by addressing the ongoing interaction between the person and the environment, both social and physical. This conceptual piece is an important contribution to the understanding of the meaning of constraints in recreation and leisure because it demonstrated interrelated possibilities and the need for further exploration over leisure constraints.

Henderson, Stalnaker, and Taylor's 1988 model examined the relationship between leisure and gender roles, which advanced Crawford and Godbey's three proposed types of barriers by concluding that "antecedent" constraints were more appropriately related to preference than to participation. Antecedent constraints were defined as "attitudes associated with a barrier such as personal capacities, personality, socialization factors, interest," etc. (p.70). Henderson et al. provided the distinction between "intervening" constraints (corresponding to structural constraints) and antecedent constraints. Their study indicated that antecedent conditions, or constraints, could shape an individual's perceptions and experiences of intervening constraints.

Raymore, Godbey, Crawford, and Eye (1994) found in a study that people were likely to experience different the forms of constraints suggested by Crawford and Godbey's 1987 study sequentially. Raymore et al's hierarchical model implies that individuals move from addressing or negotiating constraints that are within the self to

those that lie beyond the individual and affect participation. This study provided the first empirical support for the hierarchical process model of leisure constraints proposed by Crawford and others. However, they called for further research on this matter.

Accordingly, Henderson and Bialeschki (1993) found no evidence of a hierarchical pattern when examining the constraints of women in a qualitative inquiry. Despite the support of this concept, hierarchical model of leisure constraints will remain a useful tool for better understanding constraints to leisure (Henderson et al., 1996). Recent studies have used many of these concepts and continue to expand and redefine leisure constraints, while expanding the scope of research to under-served and under-researched groups and addressing their needs.

In summary, leisure constraints are “factors that limit people’s participation in leisure activities, people’s use of leisure services (e.g. parks and programs), or people’s enjoyment of current activities (Scott, in press).” Scott wrote that constraints influence both participation and preferences, that time commitments are the most frequently cited constraints to leisure involvement, that constraints vary across activities and different dimensions of leisure, that constraints vary by population groups, and that people may negotiate constraints.

According to Mannell and Keliber (1997), by becoming sensitive to the person and social situational factors that influence leisure, which affects lifestyle and personal satisfaction, people will be better able to assert positive control over their own leisure and help others realize the benefits of leisure. The leisure literature has made strides in representing diverse groups, but the specific leisure constraints that gay men are still

given scant attention. Likewise, there is a lack of qualitative, ethnographic studies that help present the complex nature of the experiences of this significant group. Furthermore, the negotiation strategies of groups like these have also been widely ignored.

Negotiation and Leisure

Increasingly, constraints negotiation is being studied by leisure researchers. The interest over this concept partly represents a belief that individuals are interactively engaged with their social worlds and that these interactions, known as negotiation, are an important context for creating meaning in their lives (Samdahl, Hutchison, & Jacobsen, 1999). Similar to what the constraints literature experienced in its infancy and growth, the negotiation research is sometimes fragmented and lacks clarity.

Negotiation has been referred to frequently within the reviews of leisure constraints. In nearly all earlier leisure constraints research, constraints and participation have been treated as "all-or-nothing" phenomena. This basic arrangement does not allow for participation to occur if there is a constraint present. Kay and Jackson (1991), among others, stated that people often engage in leisure activities in spite of constraints, and this discovery prompted a momentous change to our understanding and research efforts concerning leisure constraints; thus, leisure constraint negotiation. A framework for explaining leisure constraints negotiation was postulated by Jackson, Crawford, and Godbey (1993), central to their model was that people may negotiate through leisure constraints, rather than ceasing involvement all together.

During the first half of the 1990s, the concepts associated with leisure constraints underwent another major change. This movement distanced itself from the idea that leisure constraints totally prevented people from engaging in leisure activities. A majority of past research portrayed constraint negotiation as the navigation of fixed obstacles in which one must overcome to participate in the desired activity. Furthermore, past research had assumed that constraints have affected diverse groups or people in similar manners; contemporary researchers have started to view it differently. Research by scholars, like Kay & Jackson (1991) and Shaw, Bonen, and McCabe (1991), showed that constraints are not insurmountable obstacles to participation, but rather they can be negotiated. The work by Scott added to the notion that several negotiation strategies exist and are employed by individuals when confronting constraints. According to Samdahl et al. (1999), authors also defined constraints as obstacles that needed to be overcome in order to pursue a desired activity. Negotiation can be defined differently depending on how it is viewed and what goals need to be reached.

In recent years, the issue of constraints negotiation has been addressed as much as constraints themselves (Livengood & Stodolska, submitted). Many studies have addressed constraints negotiation from conceptual standpoints. For instance, Jackson, Crawford and Godbey (1993) submitted six propositions that explained how people negotiate constraints. More importantly, they suggested two major types of negotiation strategies: cognitive and behavior. Behavioral negotiation strategies are modifications in a person's life or modifications to leisure itself. Cognitive strategies focus on increasing

or decreasing the perceived value, costs or benefits of the activity (Livengood & Stodolska, submitted).

Many recent studies have approached constraints negotiation similarly. Researchers have examined the constraints experienced by specific groups or affecting participation in a specific activity, then examined the negotiation strategies used. However, not all research has followed the same line of thought. Samdahl, Hutchison, and Jacobson (1999) noted how negotiation is addressed in Wearing's (1995) writings of leisure as resistance, and also Jacobson and Samdahl's (1998) piece concerning leisure among older lesbians. The focal point of these studies is the manner in which people interact within their social world to achieve acceptance and find outlets for self-expression. Studies like these imply different meanings for the term negotiation than the way it used in past leisure constraints studies. Another example of how the literature was growing is Auster's (2002) study that studied gender socialization as a constraint for female motorcyclists.

According to Samdahl et al. (1999), many conditions, which in the past have been identified as a negotiation strategy in the leisure literature, would be better termed as accommodation. Accommodation occurs when individuals accept or adapt to existing conditions that are not challenged or changed. For example, Henderson, Bedini, Hecht, and Schuler's (1995) study that describes three types of responses that women with disabilities have towards recreational activities. While these responses are presented as types of constraint negotiation, Samdahl et al. (1999) find it unclear to exactly what has been negotiated in any of these three responses. They argued that these women simply

had differing ways of adapting to the constraints of their disabilities, and their responses could be viewed as different types of accommodation instead of negotiation. More importantly, without examining the negotiation of meanings in situations like motherhood or disability, as examples, leisure researchers may miss the important symbolic contexts that surround and define each activity.

A more critical perspective on leisure constraints negotiation comes from feminism. Feminism challenges leisure researchers to include far-reaching cultural ideologies as significant leisure constraints (Bialeschki & Michener, 1994; Henderson, 1991b; Shaw, Bonen & McCabe, 1991). If negotiation is just viewed as the navigation of obstacles, leisure researchers may exclude how the ideologies that create and shape meaning in our lives relate to these constraints. Samdahl (1999) et al. argued that constraints themselves might be generated when conflicting ideologies produce incompatible expectations or understandings. Until leisure researchers examine the underlying ideologies that generate conflict and constraint, little can be revealed about the true complexity of constraints and how they are negotiated in our daily lives.

Likewise, many leisure researchers fail to include the power relationships that pervade our lives and our interactions as significant factors that shape the negotiation strategies in the first place. As Samdahl (1999) et al. believed, dominant discourses create cultural representations of the proper order of things; dominant discourses define meaning and establish hierarchical patterns of power in the relationships that make up our lives. Negotiation in itself is an unspoken challenge to dominant ideologies, and thereby

rests on an exchange of power (Wearing, 1991). Hegemonic systems and ideologies are so embedded in our society that we tend to ignore them.

When these factors are studied only as obstacles that individuals must navigate and overcome, researchers place undue responsibility on the individual while ignoring the hegemonic power that created and perpetuates those constraints in the first place.

Likewise, is it possible for negotiation to be possible in all facets of a person's life?

Samdahl, Jacobson, and Hutchinson (1998) see cultural beliefs, or other hegemonic structures that are deeply embedded in society and internalized by individuals, as not easily amenable to negotiation or compromise. When confronted with these structures, they argue that many people will more likely accommodate, or to quietly go along without raising a challenge, rather than to negotiate for acceptance or tolerance.

Feminist researchers have challenged our discipline to look at the social psychological paradigm in a different light. Leisure researchers must acknowledge that individuals shape and create their lives in a world that is occupied by others. Broad cultural ideologies and hegemonic structures define what is expected and what is socially valued; these beliefs are enacted and reinforced, as well as negotiated and changed, in the daily interactions that occur between individuals. People differ in their ability to challenge and resist the meanings that are imposed upon them; successful negotiation of those factors allows individuals to situate themselves in the social context of their lives.

This critical critique of negotiation in the leisure constraints literature will help unearth aspects of negotiation that have been historically ignored. By studying diverse groups, like gay men, different reactions to hegemonic processes can be studied and

analyzed. The feminist perspective used in this study helped view leisure constraints and negotiation in non-hegemonic terms, which will help challenge previous research.

Likewise, understanding the ideologies that gay men embrace and reject will be important for understanding how and why they choose to negotiate the constraints they face.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Guiding Framework

The three basic assumptions that ground the interactionist approach are: people act out toward things based on the meanings these things have for them; meanings arise out of social interaction; and meanings are modified through an interpretive process that involves self-reflective individuals symbolically interacting with one another (Blumer, 1969). Essentially, the belief is that people create worlds of experience in which they live. They interpret the events and actions that comprise their lives based on past experiences and current meanings derived from social interaction. This perspective relies on the assumption that the individual is the final authority in subjective experience. With these ideas in mind, this study was designed to allow the participant to create the reality of the relationship between leisure and personal constraints so that a more personal understanding of the experience can be derived.

Furthermore, a feminist perspective was used throughout this study. This philosophical perspective is concerned with the equality, empowerment, and social change of women, and the elimination of invisibility and distortion of their experiences (Henderson et al, 1996), however, Bleier (1988) added to feminism's utility by stating that feminists seek to reconstruct science, so that it will benefit women, as well as other oppressed groups. Feminist scientists seek to recognize a truer complexity of nature and of individual human natures. Feminism was a useful guiding framework for this study because this perspective provides alternative viewpoints on the issue of leisure

constraints and negotiation during gay men's travel and it provides broader interpretations as well as different ways to study related issues (Bialeschki, in press). Feminist research is no more defined by the sex of the researcher than by the sex of the researched; feminist researchers put the experience of women and/or the construction of gender as the focus of analysis but this focus does not necessarily mean that only women are studied. Feminist research serves as a critique of existing research, a correction of the biases that have existed, and the groundwork for the transformation of social science and society.

Data Collection

In-depth interviews were conducted with gay men concerning their leisure travel experiences and daily life. This type of interview allowed for free exchange between the researcher and the participant with opportunities for clarification and discussion. As suggested by Reinharz (1992), this type of interview process helps explore the reality of the participant and allows him to speak in his own voice about his experiences. The open-ended interviews occurred between December 2002 and May 2003. Each interview occurred at a time and place that is convenient to the participant. All in-depth interviews were recorded on tape, if the subjects allowed, and the field-notes were transcribed afterwards by the researcher. A series of guiding questions were developed to serve as a basis for the interviews. The topics that were covered include with whom the participant traveled with, what destinations he chose to visit, what factors he included in those decisions, and so forth. Questions were also developed to gather information about

perceptions regarding constraints to leisure travel. These questions were derived partially through a small focus group.

Participant observation was also used throughout this study. As Denzin (2001) stated, “the world does not stand still, nor will it conform to the scientist’s logical schemes of analysis. It contains its own dialectic and its own internal logic. An observer can discover this meaning only through participation in the world.” Besides the in-depth interviews, the researcher immersed himself in the phenomenon that he wished to study. This method only works if the researcher can make careful notes of the interaction he engages in, which will further help shed light onto the experience of the subjects. The researcher’s goal as a participant observer was to render meaning from the perspective of those studied.

A mixture of the snowball and purposive sampling methods was used in this study. However, these methods were further modified because the Institutional Review Board (IRB) required that I passively recruit participants for this study, or in other words, gay men would have to contact me if they were interested in participating. The IRB suggested that identifying gay men and asking them if they would like to participate in this study would put those men in danger of some sort. Recruiting key informants was further hampered because the gay men that I sought to interview for this study needed to meet a certain criteria, such as having travel experience, living within the study’s site, and at least 18 years of age. By setting criteria, the study is limited in its ability to generalize holistically. Because of the limitations I encountered when recruiting key informants to interview, I was only able to interview nine gay men in-depth. However,

these men were able to take me to several cities, bars, and festivities that served as rich opportunities for data collection and participant observation.

Ethical Considerations

Qualitative studies are intrusive by nature and people have to adjust to the researcher's presence in the setting (Marshall and Rossman, 1995). I tried to minimize any risks by making all participants' identities confidential, by interviewing them at their convenience and a location they were comfortable in, and being straightforward and truthful with the purpose and scope of my study.

Kvale (1996) stated, "interview inquiry is a moral enterprise: The personal interaction in the interview affects the interviewee, and the knowledge produced by the interview affects our understanding of the human situation." Therefore, explicit and clear rules must be provided. Some of these guidelines are: informed consent, ethical codes (as outlined by Kvale, 1996), confidentiality, acknowledgment of the consequences of the interview, and a clear role of the researcher.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed through constant comparison (Henderson, 1991; Johnson, 1999). During the course of the interviews, the researcher noted interesting points as potential key aspects to consider during analysis. After all of the interviews were conducted and transcribed, the researcher thoroughly read and reread the transcripts. During the subsequent readings, the researcher searched for common trends, which were

compared with an outside scholar's interpretation of the data. Afterwards, a more thorough background literature review was performed to help explain any major themes that emerged. Data analysis relied heavily on the "Seven Research Stages" outlined by Kvale (1996): thematizing, designing, interview situation, transcription, analysis, verification, and reporting.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Introduction

This study is an in-depth examination of the experiences of gay men living in a somewhat rural southern community. While this study is certainly not limited to just a few informant's ideas and experiences, there are some participants who contributed more than others. This study relied on the participation of many gay men and women, but most importantly this study relies on the in-depth interviews I conducted with key informants. Key informants are those who I also frequently contacted for follow-up conversations and also traveled with to places outside of the study area. Table 1 is a description of the key informants used during this study that had a heavy influence in the trajectory of this research.

This study was very successful in depicting how gay men negotiate the stifling lifestyle of being a gay man in a small, rural community. In most cases, gay men used travel to find leisure experiences that were affirming and allowed freedom of expression. Furthermore, this leisure travel had lasting affects upon their return to the community in which they live. While leisure constraints still existed at home, gay men were more capably skilled at dealing with these constraints having learned some of the "tools of the trade."

Table 1. Description of Key Informants

Hans is a white male from Louisiana, finishing his Ph.D. and in his early 30s. Hans is very familiar with gay life in New Orleans and took me there for a circuit party one weekend. Hans also took me on trips to Haven and other cities. Hans came out of the closet in the early 1990s while completing his undergraduate work in Louisiana.
Kevin is a white male in his early 40s, divorced and has a teenage son. He lives with two other openly gay men, but Kevin is not out to his ex-wife or son. Kevin is a successful business man in Soledad. Kevin and I visited gay clubs and participated in other leisure activities together.
RJ is an ivy-league educated white male in his early 50s. RJ is the most well traveled of informants. He directs a humanities center at All American University and this requires him to visit many cities throughout North America. RJ also regularly visits family and friends who are scattered though-out the United States and abroad. RJ came out of the closet while in graduate school.
David is in his late 20s and about to attend graduate school at All American University. David is half Philippino and half German. He was born in the Philippines and lived abroad until he was a teenager. He has traveled Europe extensively. David and Kevin dated each other. David came out of the closet in his early 20s.
Pete is a white male in his late 20s finishing his M.B.A.. Pete is one of the more “reserved” informants, preferring to “take it easy” when he goes out partying. Pete was in a fraternity during as an undergraduate, and came out of the closet when he graduated.
Franz is a graduate from All American University, but moved away to Washington D.C. after graduation. Franz is in his mid-20s and now lives in a large urban city similar to Haven. While he is not out to some of his family, he feels that they are able to tell by the way he acts, but he does not want to cause any unnecessary problems for himself.
John has lived in Soledad for over a decade and was able to give me a lot of background information on Soledad. John recently returned to graduate school. John is in his late 20s, white, and partially deaf. John has been out of the closet since 1988.
Mikey is in his senior year at All American University, white and in his early 20s. Mikey came out of the closet during his freshman year. Mikey is a self-proclaimed gay activist. He was born Germany and recently returned from backpacking the much of Europe. Mikey hopes to move to Portland after graduation.
Mick is a graduate student who completed his undergraduate work in Ithaca, NY. Mick travels every opportunity he gets. Mick first came out of the closet to a friend while in Paris. Mick personality is the most reserved of all key informants. While he does not totally identify with the hedonistic gay life style, he does not condemn it.

It is interesting to note that the key informants all shared very similar characteristics. For instance, most of the key informants were college educated and white. This may skew the results in some fashions, but makes the results more pertinent since parameters are formed. Likewise, none of the key informants were involved in a long-term relationship at the time of this study, so their opinions and analysis of their experiences probably reflected these characteristics. Therefore, while his study may be generalizable to the gay population in some aspects, gay men who find themselves more similar to the informants may find that their experiences similar as well.

Soledad: A Stifling Community

The area of Soledad is best described as a southern college community. Soledad is actually the mixture of two sister cities that border each other, but the boundaries are seamless. New Soledad has a white-collar, strip-mall feel to it, while Old Soledad is older and more of a blue-collar community. New Soledad and Old Soledad are geographically isolated from major cities in the state; Soledad sits roughly one hundred miles away from “Haven”, a large metropolitan area with a population exceeding one million people. The Soledad community is just close enough to travel to cities like Haven, but far enough away to forget that they are there. From the center of the Soledad community, a five minute drive will have you in the middle of farms, pastures, and back roads. Cows can still be found within the city limits of this rapidly growing community.

A large public university, named All American University, sits squarely in the heart of the Soledad. This land grant university has one of the largest student enrollments in the country. The school was founded as a military college, and its military traditions pervade campus life today. The military students dress in tan polyester uniforms and interact freely with the more typical college students that attend the university. At times, the military students dress in camouflage and run around campus performing drills and screaming chants, making campus resemble a boot camp. Furthermore, the university is perceived as having a conservative social climate, partially due to the school's agricultural roots. It is common to see men in cowboy boots and hats traversing across campus, although the student population is starting to mirror the more urban public schools in the state. Many minorities students and people from larger cities feel that the school and community is stifling and old-fashioned; students from rival universities use words like "hick" or "redneck" to describe All American University.

Over 100,000 people live in Soledad when the school is regular session. Soledad is mostly an Anglo community, but does contain pockets of Black, Asian, and Hispanic neighborhoods. The diversity within the student population reflects the city of New Soledad, mostly white, with few Hispanics, Asians, and Black citizens intermingled. Out of the approximately 45,000 students, 86% are Anglo, 8% are Hispanic, 2.5% are African American, and 3% are Asian. All American University is not a diverse university, but efforts are being made to become more diverse.

Individuals and sub-groups vary in their perceptions of the Soledad. Even though these perceptions may only be held by certain individuals or particular groups, they

cannot be ignored, because perceptions are formed based on experiences within this environment, and these perceptions often help determine future behaviors. The perception of Soledad and All American University by minority groups, especially gays and lesbians, is one of a stifling nature. Due to Soledad's stifling nature, gay and lesbian people have a difficult time expressing their sexuality. There are several reasons why the gay community finds Soledad stifling enough not to feel comfortable expressing and embracing their gay identity.

Both Soledad and All American University are growing tremendously. As "John" noted describing campus' growth, "The way campus has spread; it's been like fungus in a Petri dish." Although the growth in population has also meant an increase in the gay and lesbian population, the gay and lesbian community remains mostly invisible. This stems largely from the conservative attitudes and norms found in the community. For instance, there are many churches in Soledad, but there is only one church that is openly supportive of the gay and lesbian population. Another reason that accounts for Soledad's conservative nature is that it is located in a very rural region. Even though new construction can be found through-out Soledad, several areas in the community remain undeveloped. Traditional rural, southern values are normally less relaxed than the progressive, urban values found in larger cities like Haven. Because homosexuality remains a sensitive topic, many gay men feel the need to keep this aspect about them selves hidden. "We censor what we say out of a sense of, whatever you want to call it, decency, propriety, or that fact that you have to censor what you say in a [community] full of straight men," explained RJ, who is openly gay to friends, an ivy-league educated

professor, and in his early fifties. Consequently, gay people are less likely to disclose their sexuality and therefore be “closeted¹”.

Lack of Diverse Opportunities to Meet Others

Lack of a Gay Club or Queer District

The social opportunities for gay men to express themselves are scarce in Soledad. For instance, the only gay club in town closed a few years ago. It had served as a social outlet for the gay community. Historically, Friday night was the most popular night at the gay club, because the club hosted drag performances. Local residents, such as Coco Chanel, Kiki, and Sierra Scott (all stage names), would perform regularly at the club. When the club closed down, this form of expression or leisure ceased to exist.

Friday night at the gay club would include dancing, drinking, pool playing, and all of the regular activities you would find at a “straight” bar. Keeping a gay identity secret was important for many of the gay patrons. The location of the club facilitated this as it was located in the historic, run-down part of Old Soledad that did not have much traffic. The gay bar did not have a sign or banner outside, keeping it hidden from those people who did pass it by. Many informants felt somewhat safe going to the club since it was out of sight, but this did not alleviate all of the problems associated with finding an expressive leisure outlet in Soledad. Sometimes, straight people visited the bar and these patrons served as a constraint for closeted gay people wanting to visit the club.

¹ Closeted is a native term describing a gay person who is still “in the closet”, someone who has not disclosed his or her gay identity.

Other nights at the gay club were pretty slow, with a majority of the gay customers leaving town or going to the other establishments, including Soledad Center, the entertainment district of Soledad. When the gay club was open, most of the gay population would visit the bar at some point during the school semester, because it was the only establishment a gay person could attend without encountering many of the hassles they experience outside of the boundaries of a gay-owned area.

The gay club eventually went out of business because the managers decided to pursue other ventures when business slowed. Business ebbed because many patrons found the place too expensive, which was necessary to keep the club out of the red. Business also slowed because of some of the personal differences between the patrons and the club managers and also because the environment inside became stagnant. Key figures in the gay community boycotted the club for weeks at a time in an attempt to generate change. The past few years has left the gay community with fewer options to congregate. However, a new gay club is in the works, and many informants hoped it will be an improvement over the old gay club. If this club does not work, Kevin, a divorced local businessman in his forties, and who is now gay, hopes to open a coffee shop and bookstore like the ones he likes to visit in the Queers Districts of bigger cities like Haven, Paris, or San Francisco. Some informants suggested that Soledad would be perceived as less stifling if gay people had more opportunities to meet in “safe” areas. Having safe, gay-owned spaces for a gay community to congregate in is vital to the health of that community and it helps gay men learn the idiosyncrasies of the “gay lifestyle.”

Other Meeting Grounds

Given the conservative attitudes and lack of gay bars in Soledad, there are few places where gay people can meet one another freely and openly. However, this has not stopped members of the gay subculture from finding other methods of meeting and congregating with one another. The first method, although not deeply discussed in interviews, is joining a gay oriented organization. Membership to a gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender-oriented organization is open to all gay and straight people, but there are only a handful of these organizations and most of them are affiliated with the university. Gay men and women who are not associated with the university do not usually have access to these groups. Furthermore, becoming a member of such an organization usually indicates that one's sexual orientation is gay, therefore preventing many people from joining such organizations. The reason for this is that membership in such an organization would make one's gay identity public knowledge. Gay men differ in the degree to which they want to be "out". Some gay men in this study enjoyed letting the world know that they are gay, or "being gay and proud", while others preferred to be out to only other gay people. There existed other ways to meet gay people in Soledad that were more discreet.

Once such way was to use internet chat rooms or an internet personals website. Secondly, people can scour the nightlife and hope to find the right bar or after-hours establishment where gay people meet and congregate. Third, and most extreme, one could meet a stranger at a local P.S.E. (public sex environment), either the park near

campus or on one of the campus “tea rooms²”, where names, e-mails and rendezvous meeting places and times are written on the bathroom stall walls. However, even these covert places are not safe from stigma. For example, the tearooms on campus are targets for religious propaganda, usually in the form of leaflets, and are frequently visited by the campus police.

Internet chat rooms. A gay man’s experiences when meeting other gays on-line vary from positive to negative. Reasons for chatting on-line differ widely, but many of the informants claimed that people who chat on-line regularly are mainly interested in meeting others for sex, because they may be too “closeted” to become personally involved in the gay community. This phenomenon can be quite discouraging to the “newbie³” who may be hoping to build relationships with others.

The chat rooms are not limited to only gay men, but also bisexual men and men who do not consider themselves gay, but enjoy sex with other men. As Kevin, who has been out to his gay friends for over five years, described meeting chatting on-line, “...you have men that are married to women who go on-line every single day and want to screw around with guys.” Kevin can understand this point-of-view because he was married to a woman several years ago and now has a teenage son.

“Josh”, a twenty-one year old student at All American University, explained how meeting gay people for the first time was difficult for him, because he did not know where to look or what cues to look for in other people. After a while Josh met some of

² Tearoom is a native term used to describe public bathrooms used for sexual encounters.

³ Newbie is a native term of a male new to the gay world, especially dating; this person is usually younger.

his best friends through the internet, even though he had to unsuccessfully date some of them first, which is common in the gay community.

Hans recognized both the internet as an important tool and a constraint in the gay community. He added that the internet further segregated the gay community because there was a lack of personal, face-to-face interaction, because it makes it easier for closeted gay men to stay in the closet. For instance, one profile in a chat room read, "I am not out and will never be. I am looking for guys around my age who are not out." Regardless, meeting gay people on-line is the most fruitful method in this community. When asked about how he met his friends Kevin responded, "Most of my good friends are ones that I met in clubs, on-line, or wherever." "It's free and easy," he quipped. "And discreet?" I added, wanting his opinion. "Definitely."

Using the internet chat room or messenger service, like AOL Instant Messenger, creates a rift in the lines of communication because people use screen names. A screen name is a name that is made up, and may not reflect one's true identity. For instance, a screen name could be "collegeswimmerboy", and this person may not reflect any of these characteristics.

Some on-line chatters only know other chatters people by their screen names. For instance, an informant told me about when he finally decided to call one of his on-line friends on the telephone, and when the other person picked up, he asked, "May I speak to TurtlePuff?" when he realized he did not even know his friend's real name. Furthermore, some chatters have pictures available for people to see or profiles for people to read, but not everyone supplies this courtesy. Therefore, it is common for two individual chatters

to know each other quite well, but have no idea what the other looks like. These phenomena in the chat rooms help keep Soledad's gay community divided, because the gay men who are hoping to build relationships remain alienated.

Gay men also use the internet to maintain relationships with friends. Because the internet transcends the local area, it is easy to meet gay people and talk to friends in other cities. It is common for gay men in Soledad to chat in chat rooms reserved for other cities like Haven. Likewise, gay men from other cities come into the College Station chat room on occasion. This occurrence helps the Soledad community aware of happenings in other cities.

The hassles of meeting other gays on-line bothered some informants because they wish that there were more diverse opportunities to meet people, without the complications of building relationships on-line or trying to guess if someone is gay or not in regular social settings, like in class, work, or out at the bars in Soledad.

Meeting in the midst of the straight world. Finding other gay people is commonly accomplished by chatting on-line, but if you really want to be around a bunch of "fags", as a lot of gay men refer to each other, Thursday night in Soledad Center has become the best option. A majority of the gay community uses Soledad Center as a meeting ground ever since the gay club closed. Soledad Center is the entertainment district in Soledad and it is mostly visited by students, but does have an older, more diverse patronage who are also bar and restaurant regulars. This part of town has dancing clubs, bars, and live music venues.

Soledad Center has changed much over the years to become a place where shiny metal decor meets decaying wood porches. Where mounted deer heads covered in dust and spider webs meet colorful oil paintings and fake plastic trees. This is a place where lungful, smoky music of Hank Williams mixes the pulsating rhythms of techno and house music. In this eclectic mix of establishments gay people meander around relatively invisible, but there is one place in Soledad Center where gay people are accepted by the regulars and tolerated by the other patrons. This bar is called “Friendly’s”, where there are always at a couple of the long-time regulars leaning up against the bar, especially during happy hour. You can see these regulars on a daily basis; this is the sort of place that sociologist Ray Oldenburg would identify as a “Third Place.” As Craig, a day-time bartender at Friendly’s suggested, “It would take an act of god to get some of these people to miss happy hour.” Happy hour is the time of the day when the regulars visit Friendly’s, saving the nighttime for the younger crowds.

It is common for a gay person to go to Friendly’s by him or herself and associate with other bar patrons throughout the week. In fact, some of the regulars are openly gay and have built lasting relationships in the bar. On top of that, there is tradition of gay people congregating at Friendly’s on Thursday nights, and more recently at another bar named “Disco.” The larger the group becomes, the more stereotypically gay the crowd acts in both of these places, according to informants. When the gay crowd grows, it acts more flamboyantly gay. There are two reasons for this. First, this congregation exudes energy and creates the kind of buzz that one can find when energetic and excited groups, especially friends. At the beginning of the evening, when there are only a handful of gay

men and lesbians sitting on the front porch or inside the bar, the level of excitement or energy that comes from bar-going crowds is tame, but as the night progresses and more people show-up, people start to get into the mood of the end-of-the-week festivities. In most of the cases that I observed, the group, as a whole, started to act more stereotypically gay. Secondly, these gay people relax and act gay because of the feeling of safety that comes from being surrounded by other gay people. In other words, they feel a sense of safety when congregating in larger groups, or safety in numbers. As David explained, "You can call each other girl, and just act more effeminate, but it's just playing with the fact that you are gay...I think I play it up around other gay people." It is generally known by straight people who frequent Soledad Center that these two bars have a larger than usual number of gay people on Thursday nights, and they either avoid these places because of this phenomenon or accept it because they enjoy going there.

Thick description of Friendly's. It was about 12:30 am, just thirty minutes before closing time in Soledad, when I decided to visit the Friendly's. My house was warm and comfortable, so I was still wearing the ragged green shorts that have staples holding a tear on the front, right leg area, and a three year old, white tee shirt, that is beginning to fray around the collar, which read "Don't Mess with Texas." I mention what I was wearing because I rode my bicycle to the part of town where the bar is, and it was chilly outside, enough for me to think about going back to the house and putting on some blue jean pants. I was only about two minutes away from my destination, so I decided to push on forward through the chilly night.

I locked up my bicycle and started to walk down the red brick sidewalk that passes in front of two bookstores, two drinking establishments, and a popular burrito bar. Even before I pass the first business, I can see the gathering of people about 100 meters or so up the sidewalk. From this distance, the group of people looks like it could be any other group of people that likes to congregate on the sidewalk. As I glide closer, I notice that the group is packed together pretty tight, like a group of people that are waiting to cross a busy intersection, except that they are not facing the same direction, but inward. When I finally walk up to the group, I push my way into the middle where it is no longer cold, but warm. I am underdressed for the occasion, everyone else wears pants and nice shirts, shirts that I would consider to be a little too nice for hanging out at a beer joint that has twenty-five years of smoke and tar covering the walls and deer heads. I can smell perfume and cologne in the air.

This group of people accumulates every Thursday night on and around the old, wooden porch at the Friendly's. Friendly's just celebrated its 25th anniversary, and to my knowledge, the original wood on this porch still supports masses of people every week. Looking at the porch, one can see that it is divided into two parts, left and right. Between these two parts is the front door into the bar; either side of the porch is about 12 feet long, and about five feet wide. The left side of the porch opens on the right next to the glass door that leads inside, but is enclosed at the other end by a wooden wall. The right side of the porch has access on both sides. There is a wooden rail that you can duck underneath if you wanted to get off the porch. Each side of the porch is elevated about six inches. There are about fifteen people standing on the old wood planks on each side

of the porch, one side the women's rugby team, the other a mix of men and boys drinking beer and trying to look attractive.

The first thing I observed as I make it to the middle of the crowd is a friend of mine, Josh. He is sitting on the bench next to the door on the right side of the porch. His head is leaning against the wall, and his eyes are swollen just a little bit. Josh is a student at All-American University. He is wearing loose blue jeans and a red and white, short-sleeved Polo-type shirt. His sandy blonde hair is short on the sides and spiked or hair sprayed so that it stands up a bit in the front. He is sitting alone on the bench amidst all of these people who create a noisy chatter; many other college aged students stand around him but no one is facing him, so it creates an isolated feeling that I have experienced, since you at people's waists. He tells me that he is very drunk, and so I naturally asked him why.

"Long, hard week," he replied. We chat for a little bit about various things, and he wonders why I am just barely making it out, because it is so near closing time. I told him I was just coming to say "hi", which is true, but I also wanted to see who was out and what I might be missing. At this point the idea of a beer starts to sound good, but I peered through the glass door and saw a line about six deep at the bar. I decided against it and decided just to enjoy the idea of drinking a beer.

Then someone grabs me from behind, in a bear hug. I do not know who it might be, until this person twists me around and gives me a kiss on the cheek. It is Jeff, and overly friendly acquaintance of mine that loves to talk about the going-ons in his and his boyfriend's life. Jeff has a square face and short blonde hair, he looks like the type who

would sunburn very easily. He has a gap between his two front teeth, and he wears tight wranglers blue jeans and a belt buckle that he won some rodeo competition. Jeff hardly ever comes out on Thursdays, so I ask him what brings him out. Apparently he did not feel like driving to Austin tonight to spend the weekend with his boyfriend, so he just wanted to drink with the locals. I did not mind talking to Jeff, but I feel trapped after a few minutes because we always have to talk about what he wants to talk about, so I quickly look for a friend to help me escape. Then I see Kellie on the left side of the porch. I call Kellie the “King of the Lesbians” or “Queen Bee”; for whatever reason, she is a good person to know.

Kellie is a hoot. Kellie is about thirty-five years old, and she always wears blue jean shorts that she fashioned herself with a pair of dull scissors. Kellie’s hair is blonde and bigger than most, the kind of hairstyle that requires hairspray and patience. She had her arm around a Hispanic-looking girl who stood about 5’5”. I know from earlier conversations that this girl plays on the women’s Rugby team. I yell over to Kellie, hoping to get away from Jeff, and she responds with a grin, the kind of grin that you can see all of her teeth, so I guess she was happy to see me. I excuse myself from my conversation with Jeff, stepped onto the left side of the porch and give her a kiss. Kellie and I always kiss on the lips, but not in a sexual way. We are just friends, and I love to talk with her. Kellie owns her own Veterinary business, she is one of the few professionals on the porch, most of us are students, but this does not create any inequity in our friendship, as it might with other people.

From the corner of my eye I see a guy named Ken. Ken is a very nice guy outwardly to everyone; he is twenty years old. He is wearing a white, long-sleeved button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled up. He has a receding hairline, and weighs about 120 pounds, which is real skinny for someone 5'10", in my opinion. He is smoking a cigarette, which I have never seen him do before, so I decided to give him a friendly hard time about that. I meander through the crowd and say hello. He gives me a hug, and starts immediately telling me how drunk he is, and everywhere where he went that night...and how bad he had to pee. Then from the left side of me, his cousin, Elizabeth, walks up and gives me a hug. She is always very nice and smiling. She is also smoking, her cigarette is about as thin as a lollipop stick; it might have been a Capri. I ask her why Josh is smoking, and then Josh replied, "A girl does what girl does". He gave me a hard time about smoking when I first met him two years ago; he let me know how dirty and foul it was, but now he is doing it. Standards change I guess.

I have never quite understood Josh, and still do not for the most part. I know that he is rich, because he drove a brand new Tahoe, and when he hit a bicyclist a few months ago in his Tahoe, his mother gave him her Cadillac SUV, because he couldn't stand the idea of driving the Tahoe any longer. Josh recently had his ears pierced, and his eyes lids are permanently tattooed so it "makes his eyes look fuller". Permanent eyeliner, that sounds painful to me. Between all of this, and his drinking problem (this is what I believe anyway, since he is always drunk), I am always suspect of him, but he makes good grades in school and is quite easygoing most of the time, so I try not to be too harsh on the guy. I think he likes to get intoxicated so he can let go and relax a bit. He is gay,

but doesn't act the stereotype usually until he is around friends, or drunk, or both, which is the case this night. Get a few drinks in him, and his feminine side comes out. He likes to wave his hands in the air, cock his waste to one side, tilt his head to the other side be noticed. He is fond of the word "girl" when he drinks. The people around him can sense the energy that he exudes, along with other guys that do not need the alcohol to make them become more vocal, just the security of the crowd. Before you know, this is an example of how the crowd on the front porch at Friendly's starts to give catcalls to straight men walking by and generally acts more like they are inside the boundaries of a gay bar.

There are two types of people that will interact with the gay group of people on the front porch, those who know that Friendly's has a gay crowd on Thursdays and those who do not. Usually straight girls are not offended or bothered by the gay crowd, if they have to walk through the gay mass on the sidewalk they will, if they feel like it would be easier to walk around the group by walking on the street, they will do that, but I get a general sense that girls in general are amused by the gay men. They might even stop and chat for a little bit. Guys on the other hand, they may get offended, especially if one of the more vocal gay guys gives a catcall or says something like "you looking fine!" Some of the straight guys are amused and flattered by such remarks, while others are offended and get mad. The ones that get mad either walk around the crowd, or barrel through the crowd, trying to be rude and let the fags know he doesn't like them but will not back down. As the night gets later, and people start feeling the effects of alcohol, I get worried

that one of the gay guys in the crowd will make a sassy remark to the wrong person walking by...

Public sex environments. Because of the past or present social disapproval of homosexuality in the United States and abroad, some gay men have felt it necessary to use very covert methods for pursuing sexual experiences with other men. Gay men searching for covert places have used public spaces, such as parks, for these rendezvous. This phenomenon is especially true before the prevalence of the internet. Meeting other men people solely for the purpose of sex can be done at PSEs (public sex environments). This activity of meeting other men happens in the cruising⁴ areas at such locales. It is generally agreed upon by informants that these encounters are more likely to lead to sex as opposed to leading towards lasting friendships. Meeting men for sex in PSEs is seen as a deviant activity by many members of the gay community for several reasons, but primarily because meeting any stranger and have sexual relations with him/her is a dangerous activity in the first place, but also these places are not known to practice safe sex.

PSEs are not visited solely by gay men. Men who identify themselves as straight, who may be married, sometimes visit the park or tearoom for sexual encounters. As John noted, "They are not self-identified as gay men, they are probably married and have kids, they are a totally different breed...I wouldn't even say that they were bi, they were straight men who would go to the park and get a quick blowjob or whatever."

Visiting PSEs is not a desirable activity in the eyes of most of the gay or straight

⁴ Cruising is an activity in which a gay man checks out another man for a possible sexual encounter.

community, even though some members of the gay community joke about their visitations to one of the tearooms, parks, and bathhouses (found in larger cities). For the most part, people engaged in these activities keep their visitations to such areas private. Likewise, people outside of the gay community are usually oblivious to the presence of such places in their community. Mikey looked at the topic in this manner:

Yeah, the invisibility serves to protect, it lets people get away with stuff. For instance, like [omitted] Park, to have a place like that is great, somewhere where people can go and do the same thing that everyone else is doing [having sex], but then at the same time, by centralizing it, it keeps us segregated; it makes it one place out of one million that we can have; it keeps us on the outside edges [of society].

The number of gay men who participate in sexual activities in PSEs is hard to know for sure, since it is a stigmatized activity and people are not likely to admit that they engage in this behavior. Most of the men that do seek such encounters do so because it is discreet. However this group is seen as a minority within the gay community. A majority of gay men want to express their sexuality in more “respectable” social settings, since these avenues are more readily available. People who use PSEs may do so as a negotiation strategy for the insurmountable constraints they encounter when building relationships or disclosing their sexual identity (i.e. coming out-of-the-closet).

The Big Secret

Disclosing one's gay identity as a constraint to meeting people. Fear of disclosing one's gay identity is the biggest contributor to the slowed development of a healthy gay community in Soledad and also the biggest constraint to meeting other gay people. This fear is based on the perceptions of the how the straight community would react to a gay person coming out of the closet. Not knowing how a straight person or the majority group will react to a one's gay identity can be scary and the consequences may be too dangerous, either personally, socially, and/or financially.

As an example, Kevin used to be the owner of the gay club. The managers of the gay club were in the process of buying the property from Kevin, since Kevin was not interested in being associated with the club. Kevin was afraid of being outed⁵ by the bar's patrons, so he never went. Keeping his gay identity secret was important because his success as a local businessman relied on the business relationships he formed with his clients while he was married; Kevin did not want to start any unnecessary problems for himself, nor was he ready to come out to his ex-wife or son. Kevin, like most gay men, wanted to come out of the closet on his own terms, when he feels that he is ready to do so.

Guilt by association. Many closeted gay people in Soledad refused to hang-out with their openly gay friends in public because they are afraid of being identified as being gay. Informants referred to this as "guilt by association." Mick explained to me his experience about being outed, "I have a lot more gay friends now. And if one of them is

⁵ Outed is a term used to describe the process of a gay person's gay identity being disclosed for them for him or her usually against his or her wishes

out, by association, then I am one too, to other people.” When John, a full-time network administrator and graduate student at All American University, was finishing his undergraduate degree at All American University in the 1990s, he had trouble keeping gay friends, because of the attitudes that were prevalent during the late 1980s and early 1990s. As John explained to me:

When I first came here, I was very out and open, and really, it chased off a lot of my gay friends, nobody would hang around me; I had straight friends galore that had no problem with the fact that I was gay, but other gay people really didn’t associate with me because I was out...I used to wear shirts like ‘Nobody knows I am gay’, and that would really scare some people off.

John’s observation still holds true today. Maintaining friendships with gay men who are worried about being outed is tedious. I noticed the frustrations of some gay men at Friendly’s or Disco’s when their closeted gay friends would distance themselves away from the group or even make gay jokes, in an attempt fit in with their straight counterparts. It seemed that closeted gay men can not enjoy themselves as much as out gay men when out in Soledad Center, because they are constantly “on-guard.” It is very common for closeted church-goers or fraternity members to be afraid of being outed while congregating with other gay men in public. “If one of my friends comes in here, don’t act gay,” I was told by a young, gay fraternity member one evening. Some informants agreed that if Soledad was larger, or if the social climate was more relaxed, the anxiety of being outed would be less prevalent.

Diversity as a Constraint to Group Cohesion

In order to study Soledad's gay community in relation to other groups, I tried to examine the sources of knowledge and the network of communication. Meeting other gays and retrieving information depended on how connected one is to the network of communication, but this does not mean that the gay subculture is a closed system. Members of the gay subculture are also members of other groups. Even so, I found Soledad's gay community to be self-segregated, based on intra-group diversity.

Soledad's gay community has a network of communication that is intended to keep people informed on parties, social gatherings, gossip, and, of course, just keeping friends in touch with each other. The two distinct groups in Soledad's gay community, gay men and lesbians, hardly ever communicate with each other now. Likewise, these two main groups have smaller sub-groups within them, and these sub-groups do not interact very well either. This lack of mingling can be attributed to several reasons, but it is mostly due to the "social hierarchy" of the gay world. This social hierarchy is based on values, norms, and ideals that are prevalent in the gay community, like "beauty" or "wealth." This hierarchy is also based on race, age, class, occupational status, and the degree of one's "outness"⁶.

This disconnection within the gay community is also a product of intra-group quarrels; when you are competing for scarce resources, feelings tend to get hurt in the dating process, and this occasionally serves as the impetus for quarrels among the gay men and women in Soledad. Likewise, in such a small community, gossip travels very

⁶ Outness is a native term referring to the degree that one is "out of the closet".

quickly, so it is common for grudges to be based on false information, which is sometimes the case for quarrels as well. Regardless, Soledad's gay community is self-segregated, and the reasons may be even more complex the deeper this phenomenon is examined.

The Age Difference and "Tyranny of the Couple"

"[I] asked where was a bar that I could go as a man over fifty years old, interested in hanging around people my age." (RJ commented during an interview.)

Soledad is a town that is oriented towards the university, and therefore the population is rather young, mostly in their early twenties. Furthermore, a majority of Soledad's population are students and they usually only live in Soledad for a couple of years, until they graduate and move away to other cities for jobs or a better lifestyle. Having the majority of the gay population turnover every couple of years makes it hard for those older and middle aged adults that make Soledad their permanent home to maintain relationships.

Being older makes it hard for gay men to build and sustain relationships lasting friendships and sexual relationships in Soledad. In addition, younger gay men are sometimes very discriminating with whom they interact with. As some of the informants suggested, this is because younger gay men may have negative stereotypes of older gay men, or possibly because they are just consumed with people their own age. Likewise, older gay men usually would rather date another man who is established in his career and

who is more similar in age. Several of the informants explained that younger guys are not stable enough to date.

RJ is the director of a research center at All American University and he shared his views on age and being gay during our in-depth interview. He suggested that there is a “tyranny of the couple” that plagues him and society in general, more so than aging. RJ explained:

Well, I think there is a lot of pressure in the gay world, and in the straight world, that leads us to believe that you are an incomplete person unless you are a part of a dyad, part of a couple. And I think that is balls. I think that is bullshit, there are all sorts of ways in which you are an individual, and its lovely to have a partner to do things [with], but there is a sense that I do feel at times, whether it is self-imposed or externally imposed...an insufficiency because I am single, where I don't feel that as insufficient because I am over fifty.

The informants generally held positive images of themselves, regardless of the stereotypes they felt others held of them. However, some of the informants agreed that there seemed to be roles that different age groups served and part of the gay social hierarchy certain age groups belonged within, and this did not necessarily make them feel more valuable. They felt these assumptions were widespread in Soledad. There is an obvious distinction between age groups at local bars in Soledad and gay bars in Haven or other big cities, where bars are oriented towards specific age groups or tastes. Although the “older” men I interviewed do not feel like they are fundamentally any different from their younger counterparts, they definitely felt like outsiders in a culture that is youth-

oriented. I found age to be a major factor that stratified and divided gay culture or lifestyle.

Diverse Scenes

It also came to my attention that there are several different “scenes” that can be found in Soledad. A scene can be related to the concept of social worlds, in the fact that people who congregate in specific scene tend to have common interests and characteristics that define that scene. However, scenes can be more temporary, and may lack well-defined networks within them. A scene can be a network in and of itself, but networks do not necessarily have to be associated with a particular scene. The use of the word “scene” was chosen because it was used by informants, for example, “I would never go there, that is not my scene.” On Thursday night some of these scenes are represented near or inside Friendly’s. While it is not obvious that there are diverse scenes in this mostly inconspicuous gay population, there are diverse scenes present in Soledad when looking from an insider’s point of view.

“Can you believe how disgusting it is out here?” speaking in a voice loud enough so the people “Jill” was referring to could hear. Jill is a graduate of All-American University, a lesbian, and a veterinarian. “Even the freaks think the crowd outside is freaky.” Thursday night, gay men and lesbians gather at Friendly’s and at the bar two doors down called “Disco”. Friendly’s is divided into a front room and back room. The back room is where a majority of the straight people hang out on Thursday nights. The front room has access to College Drive and the front porch. Here people passing by can

notice how the crowd on the porch and on the sidewalk acts “gay.” They can notice men holding hands, men acting unusually effeminate, unusually masculine women, and the occasional cross-dresser. Another less flamboyant sub-group of the gay crowd gathers at “Disco.” This crowd is more elitist, not associating with the Friendly’s crowd as much since Disco opened. When everyone gathered at the Friendly’s, the elite crowd mingled with the members from the other group(s), but only when wanting to get information on an upcoming party or possibly buy drugs, or just out of politeness. Usually the elite group stayed on one half of the porch while the “other” stayed on their side.

Hans explained why he thought the gay crowd is so divided in Soledad. First, the elite crowd at Disco is younger and emulates the values held in gay culture: youth, style, beauty, and physical fitness. The crowd at Friendly’s is more ethnic, less physically fit, acts more flamboyantly gay (thus drawing attention to themselves), and does not fit the image that is found in the gay media. “The freaks on the porch have nothing to lose, they must feel like they are stuck in the ‘lesser’ of two groups, so they might as well be loud and annoying,” as Hans presented the situation. However, these are not the only two groups found in Soledad, although they are not as evident and easy to find as they are in larger cities. For instance, in Hans’ viewpoint, the elite crowd found at Disco could move up the social ladder, in terms of being more attractive and being sought after more frequently. For example, members in a fraternity, whether they are gay or not, were highly regarded by some of the informants. However, homosexual activities within the fraternity system are even more very covert and exclusive, because it operates within a restrictive, closed community. One of the reasons why fraternity guys are highly coveted

is because they resemble the dominant image that is typically found in the media, like Abercrombie & Fitch advertisements. To be able to date someone from this group would be considered a trophy and an accomplishment.

Another example of a distinct gay sub-population is the university's military educational institution, which embraces the "don't ask, don't tell" philosophy, so the gay members in this group usually only associate with each other, rarely reaching out publicly to the other groups. Even the on-campus dorms have their own gay community, but this group usually joins the larger gay community as they move out of the dorms into apartments and rental houses, and start attending house parties, which have become more important in the absence of a gay club. I was told by "Donny", a gay black man, that there are several gay black people, students or otherwise, that have their own social world. Donny is a good example of the division with the gay population as a whole. Most of the "elite" group avoids Donny because he is overweight and black, a so-called "double whammy".

Jill, the lesbian veterinarian, and other permanent members of the community, noted how the gay community was more united when they had a gay club to congregate in, but ever since the bar closed, the community cohesiveness fell apart. This may partially explain why the sub-groups have become less tolerant of each other and why there is less inter-mingling between the sexes. Jill remembered a couple of years ago when community was more supportive of each other, but now it seems like these groups are competing for space and identity.

Because the gay population in Soledad is not large, it is difficult for different scenes to develop fully. For example, a gay person who identifies with the “punk” scene will be seen as odd and out of place, since he might be the only person in that scene. While different scenes, or groups, are more visible and present in larger cities, they are not as accepted in Soledad by the gay community, partially due to their small size and lack of visibility. In general, the gay community in Soledad follows the mainstream doctrine, however, diverse groups do exist and are struggling to find a voice in this stifling community.

Leisure Travel as Freedom of Expression

The stifling nature of Soledad makes finding leisure activities that affirm one’s gay identity difficult. Leisure in this study can be seen as an avenue towards attaining freedom of expression. Because of the many leisure constraints in Soledad, a popular negotiation strategy used to attain this experience of self-expression was leisure travel, away from Soledad to more relaxed social climates.

Leisure Travel as a Negotiation Strategy

“As far as traveling experiences, I will admit most of the time I go to a city, I will find the gay nightlife...nine times out of ten.” (David admitted during an interview.)

Due to the stifling nature of Soledad that most gay people experience, many of them are at odds with how to pursue leisure activities that affirm their gay identity. In

some cases, gay men in Soledad have not come to terms with their sexuality and have not come out of the closet to their close friends in Soledad. This makes it difficult to live in Soledad. However, this may be true in other cities as well.

Among the many constraints that were mentioned by participants in the in-depth interviews, the most pervasive one was that some gay men feel repressed by the hetero-normative culture in Soledad. To put it plainly, gay men had a hard time being themselves in Soledad. Consequently, many of the informants said they traveled to Haven, and other cities like New Orleans, where they can find opportunities to be with gay friends, go to gay places, or just escape the hetero-normative culture of Soledad. Leisure travel is the most popular negotiation strategy for leisure constraints gay men experience in Soledad.

Larger, more progressive communities are more likely to have gay clubs and queer districts. In these areas, gay men are able to forget that they are gay, and just be gay. In other words, due to the more relaxed social climate, gay men have to be less on-guard, as David illustrated, “I guess whenever I am with my friends, yes, I am a little more flamboyant, especially if you are in a gay bar.”

Kevin explained his desire to visit gay bars in other towns: “My need for that is about every weekend. I love going out, I love being with my friends, and that is important to me.” Kevin is content living in Soledad and plans to stay a while longer, as long as he is able to continue his weekend travels to cities like Haven. At some point, Kevin plans to move to Haven, but is not ready for his life to change that dramatically yet. He still has a teenage son and continues to base his businesses out of Soledad. As

Kevin noted, without the opportunities to be “gay”, which are provided through leisure travel, Kevin’s life would lack balance.

John, who has lived in Soledad for over a decade, has seen many changes, but he believes that there is still a common trend of gay people escaping Soledad to express or find them selves, especially those who are not college aged, “Some of the older people are more paranoid, they had careers to protect and whatnot. This is why some of them use travel to express themselves; they would feel too guilty [to pursue leisure that would identify themselves as being gay in Soledad].”

Although many informants did not find it necessary to live or visit queer districts or areas all of the time, they valued such places tremendously. Pete, a business graduate student who will return to a queer district to live once he graduates, said, “I think it is nice to have a district that caters to you, our lifestyle. I don’t think there is enough of it, but I think it’s getting better.” Another reason Pete traveled to cities like Haven on a regular basis is because of the friendships he has in those cities, “I have very close friends there, two of my best friends live there.”

Sometimes, informants traveled to larger cities to enjoy cultural opportunities that are not offered in Soledad. “In a way, I wouldn’t consider that (travel to Haven on the weekend) leisure travel, but yeah it is. Like this weekend I went to Haven with somebody to see a movie, at the [omitted] Theater, just because we knew that movie would not come to (Soledad). Anyhow, I wouldn’t say it was a gay theater, but it’s a theater that has artsy films that you will find a lot of gay people there.” Soledad only has

one theater, and it only shows big box office movies. Some gay oriented movies can only be found in specialty, art house movie theaters found in larger cities.

Larger cities also have opportunities to catch musicals, ballets, operas, or symphony performances. While not all gay men find enjoyment in such activities, many still do enjoy and find refuge in the arts. It is common for a couple or friends to go to Haven for the evening, eat at a nice restaurant, catch an art house movie, and then have drinks at a gay bar. Dates like this are impossible in Soledad. Informants like RJ traveled to Chicago several times a year to enjoy the fine arts that city offered, since Soledad's opportunities are lacking. As one non-gay informant stated about such opportunities in Soledad, "Culture comes on a bus once a month, then leaves."

Planning Ahead

Picking a travel destination includes forethought, usually about the gay tolerance of the destination. "Going to certain places, traveling, most of the time you don't have a fear because you are picking that place because you know that you will feel comfortable there, or you assume that you will," Franz commented. Planning ahead entails several considerations. First, the set of destinations may be narrowed by whether certain countries or regions are homophobic, illustrated with Hans' comments, "Like I can't imagine going to Cairo, or something like that, that has a predominantly Muslim population, and by extension, a homophobic sort of society. I wouldn't go to a place like that, to go out and have fun and be gay, because I know that it will be oppressive in some way."

Another consideration in the planning process is picking travel partners. Gay men find it extremely important to travel with people who will not deny them opportunities to encounter gay experiences. For instance, John noted his trip to New Zealand with his straight friend:

We would hit the bars in the different towns and, overwhelmingly, we would always end up in the straight bars, because that is where he wanted to go...(after a few drinks) I would be like ‘well, I am going over to this gay bar, do you want to come?’ So I think it was obvious that we would do the straight things first, and then if it came up, we would do the gay thing...I had to be the accommodating one.

Gay men do not want to experience the same negative experiences of home while on vacation, so picking an accommodating travel partner is vital.

Mikey used his trip to Europe as a chance to shop for items that are hard to get here in the U.S. While he was there he pursued some of the extreme adventure sports like bungee jumping and parasailing. He also found that traveling with a close friend is better than with family, which he described as, “a stroll through hell,” because of his parent’s homophobia. Picking the right travel partner is very important when traveling. First, a good travel partner has to be compatible with the needs of a gay man, so it is vital that a travel partner keep no secrets about one’s sexuality. If traveling with a straight person, it must be understood that the gay man might pursue gay experiences; both people need to be accommodating.

A third consideration is deciding what activities to pursue. Most gay tourists have desires to see the touristy sights and as well as get a taste of the culture they are visiting, just like most tourists do. However, many gay travelers and tourists pick destinations on the opportunities to experience gay life, either queer districts or festivals, like Pride weekends or circuit parties. Gay travel books, like Fodor's, are popular and helpful when traveling to areas and planning activities. Visiting other gay friends is also a big motivation for travel, but sometimes destinations are chosen by the availability of opportunities in the gay network. Kevin described his experience of staying at a friend's house, or an acquaintance's house find found through the gay network as, "You get to see more of the guts of the area that you are in. You make the contact with someone, I don't know, the adrenaline of meeting someone that you have never met before." Many other informants have taken advantage of the gay network by staying at an acquaintance's house while traveling.

The gay network can be influential when making travel plans. For instance, the gay community is sometimes referred to as "family"⁷ because of the willingness to house and help out other gay travelers. Travel plans derived from the gay network aid gay travelers avoid the harassment or hostility that can occur outside gay friendly places. Queer districts are usually very accessible to gay people, and are often the focal points of much leisure travel.

⁷ Family- a native term meaning the bond gay people have with each other because of being gay.

Finding Your Scene

One of the first experiences that a gay man might have in a queer district is visiting a gay bar. This is especially true for the college aged gay men in Soledad that leave to the bigger cities on the weekends. Gay clubs are the hub of gay culture, and they often wield a great influence on a newbie. As Jill noted of gay people in the coming out process, “Most of these kids don’t have a strong self-identity before coming out, so they latch on to the gay culture and make being gay their identity.” She considers this true for lesbians and gay men alike.

Attending gay bars and clubs is widespread in the gay community in general, and in some cases it becomes a leisure career or hobby, with people going nightly. As Jill noted, sometimes gay men and women use the gay night life to develop their identity, so in that case they would be more likely visit cities where these opportunities exist. However, not all gay night clubs are the same. Gay clubs can range from video bars to leather bars to dance clubs to strip clubs. Different bars/clubs specialize in age, fashion/style, race, sexual preference, fetishes, and more. Gay men develop preferences for particular bars or clubs and attending specific bars give evidence of these preferences. For example, attending a country and western gay bar would signify that you enjoy country and western music and culture. As RJ noted during his first trip to the state, “And it just blew my mind, all of these guys dancing, line dancing and so on. I have never seen anything like that; they don’t do that in New Jersey.” His friends preferred attending the country and western gay bar on a regular basis, and rarely attended other types of gay bars.

A gay man can find other social outlets that he enjoys and identifies with by visiting specialized bars. Finding one's scene or role is important to a gay man because the diversity found in the gay community can be overwhelming. There are many scenes or roles a gay man can take on in the gay community, like being a gay rights activist or sports enthusiast or clubber. For instance, in "Harbor", another large city over one hundred miles away from Soledad, I met several gay men in one of the dance clubs who were all involved in a gay soccer league. For a gay man in Soledad, finding a preferred scene is more difficult since there are fewer social outlets and organizations/clubs to join.

Other scenes are more deviant. For instance, Hans enjoyed partaking in drugs and dancing at the clubs he visited in Haven, because this opportunity does not exist in Soledad. He explained, "The kind of scene that I go to, looking for, is probably more drug friendly." The drug scene and sexual opportunities seem to be more prevalent in gay culture. However, Hans is not as interested in having sex as he is just flirting and being noticed, therefore he will pick a club that will offer such opportunities. Hans stated the difference from when he was younger and now being in his early-30s, "it's not so much sex anymore, I want attention when I go [to gay bars]." There are distinctions in the types of clubs that one can go to when looking for sex as opposed to just going out and having fun. The diverse bar scene offers a wide spectrum of opportunities to satisfy diverse tastes.

Circuit parties as the epitome of gay life. Informants noted the diverse leisure opportunities that can be found in the gay world, especially within the gay night-life. The bar and club scene can become very hedonistic, especially in large cities like Haven and

New Orleans. Some informants enjoyed staying out at the bars late, while others preferred “taking it easy”. As Kevin noted, “I am not going to spend my entire night partying out at gay bars and sleep all day, and then do that again, unless if it’s a circuit party.”

Circuit parties are a great example of how gay culture can go to extremes with partying and other hedonism activities. A circuit party can usually be found at least every other weekend somewhere in the United States. Circuit parties have become huge boosts to tourism in cities, because several thousand gay men travel there for the weekend. Kevin described his experience in Atlanta for the annual “Hotlanta” circuit party as, “You just have to experience it. We were there for four days, and it’s party after party after party, and that’s all it is. I am ready to go back to the next one!” However, attending circuit parties on a regular basis, or being a “circuit queen”, is an activity reserved for those who can afford it, because they can be expensive. Kevin noted:

Circuit parties are expensive. Hotlanta you can spend a couple hundred on airfare, and then hotel, then a couple hundred on tickets to events. That doesn’t even include your drinks or meals, nothing. So you are going to pop \$800-1000 for that weekend, but you will see more naked and half-naked men than you ever have seen in your life!

I was able to attend two separate circuit parties during the study, one in New Orleans and the other in Haven. The Halloween circuit party included free alcohol with the \$50 entry fee on Friday night and the \$65 on Saturday night; this circuit party is the biggest gay Halloween celebration in the world. Many gay men from all over the world

attended the circuit that weekend. The actual dance was held at the municipal auditorium, and several thousand gay men attended, most of them dressed in costume. From the moment I arrived, I witnessed drugs being consumed, public sex acts, and the over-consumption of alcohol. I attended this circuit party with Hans, and after the official dance was over, most of the gay men went to the gay clubs in the Queer District to continue partying. This routine happened for three nights until the festivities ended Sunday night.

Not all gay men attend circuit parties, while some only attend circuit parties once or twice a year. On the opposite end of the spectrum there are “circuit queens”. Hans defined circuit queens as, “whose primary existence is to go out to circuit parties, stay out all night, dance, you know, have fun...certainly it is their big hobby.” Franz suggested that being a circuit queen is “a lifestyle.” Being able to attend circuit parties on a regular basis requires free time, expendable income, and a taste for hedonism, which is the stereotype that mainstream society has of the gay lifestyle.

Some of my first impressions of circuit parties may be skewed because I was in New Orleans during Halloween. So, seeing a group of guys having a single leaf as their Halloween costume, I was taken back for a second, but I knew that it was definitely within the gay rules to dress in such a way, but it is also within the French Quarter rules to get away with such things. These two relaxed subcultures mixed together adds to the excitement and deviant tones of this particular weekend.

Bath houses and their social structure. The other circuit party I attended in Haven was a different experience. Instead of going to the after hours parties that were

scheduled by event organizers, I was taken to a bath house with my informants where they said could relax and let the drugs wear off. A bath house is like a fitness center, with a pool, hot tub, dry and wet saunas, and fitness room, except bath houses have rooms one can rent with beds and televisions that show pornography. Upon entering a bath house, you are given a towel, and although you can wear whatever you want, most men walk around in just the towel. What activities one can pursue in a bath house is entirely up to the person deciding, but I noticed two distinct groups. The first group uses the bath house as a social gathering place, where they can experience the drugs they have taken, or will take, in a safe environment and hang-out with their friends. The other group of men is more interested in finding sexual partners, usually in the steam room where anonymous sexual activities are common. As one man from the first group explained the major difference from the two groups, "The majority of guys that use the steam rooms are usually not from Haven, they are out-of-towners." Since finding sexual encounters may be harder for gay men who live in smaller cities or towns, the bath house may serve as a place to release their sexual frustrations.

Being in the bath house was a surreal experience for me, and I could tell how it was liberating for many of the gay men that went there. Karl explained his point of view, "The fact of being there and watching different people, watching the act of sex, watching someone swim nude in the swimming pool or sauna, whatever, I like that, I enjoy that...I am forty-one years old and I have just tried a bath house, want to try drugs, and want to do all of the different things." Although drugs are easy to obtain in bath houses, I was told that in the recent past undercover police officers have tried to infiltrate the drug

scene and arrest people. While the bath house is still relatively safe and considered to be a gay-only environment, some gay men remained paranoid about consuming drugs or practicing certain sexual acts, since they feared it might still be illegal in the state.

Karl also explained that different bath houses offer different scenes. Of the three bath houses in Haven, one nicknamed “Grandma’s” is the cleanest and most social, with gay men coming after work or on the weekends to exercise or sit by the pool. Another bath house is similar to Grandma’s, geared towards sex and drugs, but not as clean and offering less amenities. The third bath house is more “dungeon-like”, geared toward fetishes. Karl developed a preference for the “nice, clean” bath house, Grandma’s, because it catered to the nicer, more clean-cut crowd. Interestingly, Karl noted that his first experience in the bath house changed his negative pre-conceived notions he had of bath house, and now he likes to visit them regularly.

Keeping Your Cover

Leisure travel was regarded as a way for gay men living in Soledad to explore and affirm their gay identity. The same fears and worries that gay men reported experiencing in Soledad, like fear of harassment or discrimination, are still present in bigger cities, but these worries are not as prevalent. Because of the size of Haven and other large cities, there is less fear of attending gay bars and being afraid of seeing someone that might “out” you. The chances of meeting someone from Soledad in a gay area are slim, but if this did happen, it can be assumed that they too are gay, or at least gay friendly.

However, not all travel is hassle free. Informants said that leisure travel, even to progressive cities like Haven, was punctuated by episodes of hostility and awkwardness. Informants noted the importance of guarding their gay identities until they felt safe enough, or until they were in an area that was known to be queer friendly. For instance, RJ, who is out to most everyone he knows, explained, “That’s not to say that I am out totally, without there being occasions when I felt some bit of unease or uncertainty or desire to be invisible.” A desire to remain invisible, or rather, not disclose one’s sexuality through one’s actions or speech, was a common negotiation strategy used by gay men in potentially dangerous situations when traveling. RJ used this strategy in a specific situation when he was checking into hotel room with his partner and felt uncomfortable when the employees were “looking at him like he smelled.” Instead of asking for one bed, RJ asked for two separate beds to disguise his homosexual relationship.

Visiting new or foreign cities can create anxiety as gay travelers may lack awareness about the areas that are gay friendly. Mick’s story about visiting a gay bar in Shanghai, China serves as a great example. His encounter happened as he left a gay bar that he found in a travel guide. Being in a large foreign city was overwhelming already, but attending a gay bar that was hidden in a long alley far from his hotel and being cautious because of the taboos about homosexuality in China left Mick even more nervous. Mick felt terrorized when a strange Chinese man followed him and started questioning him as he left the gay club. Eventually, Mick found out that the tall, strange Chinese man was gay too, but this did not comfort Mick any more. Mick kept on-guard

since he was in a place where he lacked good information about what areas were “out-of-bounds” for gays, and particularly since he did not have the comfort of being with friends. Still, Mick was happy that he had the opportunity to check out the gay scene abroad.

Gay men often hid car decals or other visible signs signifying their sexuality while traveling. Mick explained that he avoided putting a rainbow sticker on his car as it might attract attention as he traveled through rural towns. “I am more worried about myself than I am about my car, obviously. I figure it would be nice (to have a sticker), but I would rather not invite the danger.”

Outright harassment can even occur in larger, progressive cities like Haven. These episodes often occur in places that are outside gay friendly areas. In fact, incidents of gay bashing have occurred in Haven, but years ago. Kevin’s experience is typical:

I have experienced it a couple of times. One time it was directed at me, in Haven at a McDonald’s, one block off of [street name omitted]. Me and three other friends were in eating and a guy from off the street came into the restaurant and he wanted money. I told him that I would buy him a meal, but I wasn’t going to give him money, and I got up out of the booth to walk up to the front counter to buy him a meal, and he made a comment like “you’re like any typical fag, you are greedy with your money and don’t trust anyone.” And I told him at that point that he was probably not that hungry, you know, he could probably go ahead and leave.

Sometimes hostility or unpleasantness comes from other gay men. David explained how some train stops in Europe are used for cruising areas and how at one stop he was hit on excessively by a gay man:

This man basically stalked me, followed me to the bathroom, offered me money to have sex with him, and I told him no...[then] he started following me around the train, and I saw some train station police, and I told him that this guy was following me...[because] he wouldn't leave me alone [and] didn't know when to stop...And I felt bad, being a member of the community, because that guy was gay and I am gay, but beyond that he was still harassing me.

This is a similar reason why many informants said they did not enter gay clubs alone or attend gay festivities by themselves, because the gay men at these locales can be very intimidating.

Feeling intimidated or anxious may stem from not knowing one's travel companions' opinions about homosexuality. Hans and Franz had such experiences on school trips to Europe. This may be especially traumatizing when the individual is not completely out of the closet. During their travels, they were afraid of being outed for fear of what their school-mates might do or say. While they wanted to visit gay locales, they felt the need to camouflage their motivations for visiting such certain places, or suppress their urges in the first place. Later, their fears dissipated when they got to know their travel companions better and found some who accepted their homosexuality.

Travel with family members also creates anxiety. Gay men tend to act differently around family members than they do when they are around their gay friends. With

family members, they act like the straight siblings or sons that their families suppose them to be. Acting straight comes naturally because that is the way the gay man has typically acted around his family members. However, informants said that they could express their gay identity with some family members. RJ's experience with family members is typical:

My brother in Oxford, in some sense, is less pleased that he has a gay brother. I wouldn't call him homophobic or hostile, he has certainly been very generous to my partners in the past when I have come to visit. He has very few gay friends; he finds the whole matter in some sense, awkward. So to say that I would like to borrow his car and go to Oxford and go have a drink at a gay bar would be something that would be imposing on him. It wouldn't be if I asked him to borrow the car and go to the bookstore or library, he wouldn't find that distasteful, where as my older brother in San Francisco, if I said to him that I wanted to go to the Castro and I might not come back in time for dinner, he would say fine.

Queer Districts and Negotiating Borders

"It was beautiful outside, so we sat outside and drank all afternoon. It makes me miss that environment, you just feel at home, being surrounded by all gay men. (Pete reminisced about living in a queer district.)

Mikey suggested that Queer districts are usually either "an enclave or ghetto." Enclaves or gay ghettos are places where gay people select to shop, live or just spend time because they can be themselves and feel safe. A ghetto does not mean that the area

is poverty-stricken, but that they are “forced” to live there to feel safe or be with other gay people. Gay enclaves or ghettos are types of queer districts. Queer Districts can best be described as gay owned space where gay men feel “in-bounds⁸” and safe from outside hostilities.

Queer districts are popular travel destinations for gay men, especially those gay men coming from towns without a queer district. Much of gay travel is from one queer district to another, for the purpose of visiting friends and experiencing gay life in other cities. Visiting queer districts is popular for gay men and women because it makes them feel welcome and at home, as Paul suggested, “I am not saying that you have to live there 24/7 or work down there, but it is nice to be able to identify, I mean we have all of our favorite things to do, eat or shop, I think it is kind of nice to have a district that caters to you, our lifestyle.”

Besides being a center of the gay community, queer districts are also full of history. Many queer districts have oral historians that detail the history that has occurred there over the years. While in New Orleans, I met several men who were eager to tell me stories about gay life in New Orleans and what it was like in previous decades. Some queer districts have particular historical significance for gay people in general. For instance, RJ’s fondness of visiting the Castro in San Francisco lies in the fact that it is one of the first queer districts in the United States:

It’s lovely, there is something nice about sitting in the Castro, with what they call

‘The Windows to the World’, the Twin Peaks Bar, which is supposedly the first

⁸ In-bounds- a term used here to signify when a gay men feels safe to act out and disclose his gay identity.

gay bar that ever had glass windows...And it's mostly an older person bar, but you can just sit there and watch the world. You know, you can feel that you are in your place, there is that to be said about traveling to (bigger) cities.

RJ, like many other informants, has been to many queer districts, like West Hollywood, Chicago, Montreal, New Orleans, Washington D.C. and other ones abroad during his travels. Many informants stated they feel more comfortable pursuing leisure while in a queer district than they do in the straight parts of the cities they visit.

Sometimes the queer districts are located next to more heterosexual areas, like the Queer District in the French Quarter, New Orleans. While in New Orleans experiencing a circuit party weekend, I was told by the gay men sharing a balcony with me about "the Lavender Line". The Lavender Line is the imaginary line that runs down St. Anne Street, and it served as the boundary of the queer district and the straight area of Bourbon Street. Hans explained, "There are a lot of straight people that walk down into the gay part of the Quarter just to see the gay bars, because they have never seen them before," but explained the area was safe because everyone in the French Quarter knew that this area was a gay-owned space. As Hans stated, "The only thing you might have to worry about are like drunk tourists from Iowa, or something like that." Most queer districts have buffer zones that separate the straight areas from the queer areas, but the boundaries are usually streets. A queer district's other boundaries may be signs, like Rainbow Flags. Gay men are aware when they are inside the boundaries of the queer district and feel that straight people are on their turf.

This fondness of Queer Districts was widespread among informants. Overall, informants visited over ten different Queer Districts in over five countries were, and all of the men interviewed enjoyed being in these areas. Karl is perhaps the best example:

I thought it was pretty cool, and I am not sure if they (Parisians in the Queer District of Paris) appreciate it. Like I have been to New Orleans with friends and started having drinks around one in the afternoon, there is something kind of liberating about it, being in a gay environment, knowing that you are gay, being around a bunch of gay people, and watching the world go by.

Within these queer districts, the gay lifestyle has its own set of rules that are more relaxed than in the straight or heterosexual society.

The lavender line and New Orleans thick description. As I stood on the balcony of one of the most popular gay bars in the French Quarter, I could see about twenty Rainbow flags dangling from the balconies on the south side of St. Anne Street. This line, as I was told by some gay men (who had offered me a bump of cocaine when I turned my head when I saw them partaking snorting the drug out of some kind of plastic delivery device) standing on the balcony with me, was called the “lavender line,” and it was the boundary line between the straight and gay parts of the French Quarter. I was looking at the masses of people walking around on Bourbon Street, but there was a gap between the two crowds, about forty feet apart, I guess this space being some kind of neutral ground. I remember when I first walked up into this area, it wasn’t the flags that I noticed first, but it was the male dancers on the bar tops dressed in either shoes or some kind of boots, and bikini-type underwear. I could see straight into the bar from the street,

I could notice the abundance of men (some kissing or holding each other), I could see dollar bills being stuffed into the stripper's underwear, I knew this was the gay part of town. Unlike Haven most of the time besides night-time, or in Soledad except for on Thursday, the queer space here is potent and in your face. The air here just made me feel alive with energy, but I was cautious because this was unmarked territory. A lot of the things I would see in the near future would shock me, until I became used to it.

Being Halloween, it was hard to say that the men I saw dressed in leather were gay or not (any other time of the year, I would just assume that men seen in this part of town dressed in S&M leather gear would be gay); most people were dressed quite elaborately, with tourists forming lines to take pictures with men dressed as the women in "Gone with the Wind," or a group of younger, college aged men dressed only with a leaf covering their private areas. It was quite pleasing to find this area, because I was dressed as a soccer player, with short blue shorts and socks that came up to my knees, and it was chilly outside, so I needed to find the warmth of the crowd. Besides that, I had just been told walking through the French Quarter to "keep on walking, faggot" by some black guys doing something near the sidewalk. I guess because they knew they were in the gay area, they assumed that I was gay, but I was surprised by their hostility. I could see the huddled mass of gay men, from one block away, the steam rose from their bodies rose up through the air as they rubbed, laughed, flirting, kissed, and danced with each other. The music became louder as I walked closer, the pulsating beat like a beacon until it drew you inside where a dance floor filled with men snorting cocaine, special k, poppers, or high on ecstasy danced the night away. It is always dark on the dance floor...

Gay Lifestyles and Rules

I think that gay culture, I agree with you, I think that they have their own set of rules. I think a lot of gay men, and I don't have too many lesbian friends so I can't speak for them, I think a lot of gay men feel since they are gay that they have been subjected to things that others haven't and that gives them a free pass to do what they want. No matter who is around or what point in time, and the whole emphasis on drugs and sex. (Paul remarked on how the rules in gay culture are different.)

From the first interview I conducted, it was obvious that the gay culture was more relaxed than the mainstream straight culture, especially in reference to sex and drugs. Hans stated that gay people and locales are "a lot more drug friendly than a lot of other situations to be in." He understands that drugs are found in the straight world too, but feels he has to worry less about being caught with drugs in gay bars because, "in a lot of ways, it has become more of a custom." During field work in New Orleans, Haven, and other cities, I saw the sale and consumption of several drugs, including cocaine, ecstasy, and GHB in gay bars and other public places. Gay cultural centers also encourage casual sex (although it would be unfair to characterize the whole gay population as lecherous). I observed sexual activities in the restrooms at gay bars of in Haven and New Orleans. Sometimes the activities would happen in a dark corner of the club for everyone to see. Male strippers are also a common sight in many gay clubs.

The origins of the hedonistic gay lifestyle may be a direct result of the oppressive heterosexual world that many gay men have experienced historically. Not all gay men

identify with the drugs and casual sex they encounter when they first enter the gay scene. Some, initially at least, react negatively to the hedonistic gay lifestyle. However, these same men may change their opinion as they become accustomed to these staples of this lifestyle. For instance, Kevin stated, “I am forty-one and I want to try drugs, and want to do all of these different things...things I have always been scared of, and known to be taboo or bad, I want to try them now.” He said he felt this way because he feels that he is 20 years behind all of the other gay men in terms of enjoying the gay lifestyle and being out of the closet.

In the gay culture, there is also an emphasis on fashion and physical beauty. Although these traits are found in mainstream society, the gay culture takes claims to have started them and practices them in extremes. I believe this may stem from the fact that gays are constantly trying to differentiate themselves from the larger, heterosexual society. Gay people like to be seen “on the cutting edge” of things. Emphasizing fashion and beauty are also ways for gay people to keep distance themselves from straight people. This can have drawbacks. An over-emphasis on beauty and fashion creates a very elite image to duplicate, which makes some gay men feel uncomfortable since they do not possess these unattainable physical characteristics. For example, Pete stated:

Yeah, there is a huge emphasis on being young, looking young, staying fit, and in fact sometimes I think there is an over-emphasis on it. We are all guilty of it. I can tell you that I would rather be with someone that had a fit body than not. I think in our society, people are judged to a much harsher extent, by gay people, not just straight people, and you see that every time you go out. In fact, I don't

know of a time when I walked into [omitted], it doesn't matter what bar, that somebody doesn't stare at you or make a comment...I won't go into a bar by myself.

Making Life Bearable

For many gay men, there was a learning curve associated with understanding how to “be” gay. Gay men who traveled outside of Soledad to experience gay life found it stimulating, and for those who are new to the gay scene might find it intoxicating. A gay man's perception of the world around him and his outlook towards it may change, depending on the amount of time he spends inside these gay social worlds, level of maturity, and previous self-identities. For instance, gay men without strong self-identities before entering the gay world may change more than those gay men who already had strong identities. In some cases, gay men just merge their identities into one, like “Ray” who was an avid rodeo fan before coming out of the closet. Instead of dropping his “cowboy” identity, Ray traveled to gay rodeos to fulfill his need to participate in a gay lifestyle while maintaining other identities. Many informants, regardless of how strongly they identified with their gay side, expressed desires to visit cities like Haven and attend gay clubs, or experience gay life in other manners once they discovered where these opportunities existed. Before visiting these queer places, a gay man often regarded Soledad barren of gayness. While leisure travel may exacerbate this feeling, it may also help the individual negotiate his home city more effectively and recognize what is there that he did not see before.

Living and experiencing gay life are activities that are inextricably tied to leisure. In fact, most of informants expressed that they only felt gay when they were participating in leisure activities, whether drinking in a gay bar, shopping with friends, or watching gay-oriented movies or television shows. Significantly, experiences gay men encountered during leisure travel bled into their everyday life. Two of these lasting effects are the enhancement of their gay gaze and the development of friendships.

The Gay Gaze

Being around other gay people and in gay areas helped informants see life through a gay man's eyes. Seeing the world through gay lenses changed their perceptions of the world around them. Leisure travel facilitated the development of a gay gaze. Let it be noted that the term "gaze" should not be confused with how it is used in other disciplines. The term "gay gaze" could very easily be termed "gay lens" or "queer eye," future research might help finalize the terminology, while helping differentiate it from definitions found in other areas of study.

During his travel abroad in Europe and domestically, Sam attempted to visit the city and explore what his life would be like if he lived in that city as a gay man. Sam said:

I like to do the same things in places that I visit that I would do here, just to get a sense of what life is like over there, so maybe going to the gay bars would be something that I would do if I lived there, so I feel like I have to see them. I am

not a big museum person, so I would dedicate little time to those things. I love to traverse the city on foot and establish a relationship with it.

He claimed that understanding the city from his point of view helps him appreciate what his life at home lacks, and what it does offer. He can judge his life as a gay man with more authority.

Some gay men, like Pete, skip the queer districts and other gay things because they are interested in doing all of the “normal” touristy things when traveling, but at the same time they are acutely aware of their gay self-identity. Most of the time informants traveled with other gay men, thus making every place they go to more “gay.” Pete noted, “It is not necessary to check out the gay life, but to see the city and stuff like that...I mean, I am sure if I did go I would check out the gay area, but that wouldn’t be the main reason for the trip.” For example, some informants talked about Gay Days at Disney World, and how they transformed this “straight” place into a magical, gay wonderland. Part of the gay gaze is how gay people have a knack for making the area that they visit gay, and therefore, more “fabulous.”

The gay gaze can be sharpened through unexpected experiences that may occur without planning, like John’s experience in a Las Vegas hotel when he visited its fitness club and found gay undertones. John noted:

Come to find out that the hotel that we were staying at, did not know this beforehand, they had a workout room on the first floor. It was 20 bucks a day, which is outrageous, so I decided to wait until the end of the trip to see what it was all about...come to find out that that specific locker room, whatever you want

to call it, is in a gay manual as a bath house...we went first thing in the morning and after dinner we decided to go back and we realized right off the bat 'oh my god, look at all of these guys cruising each other.'

This serves as an example of how one can find gay life in the midst of the heterosexual world, if one looks with a gay gaze at the world around him. John now frequently tries to notice gay undertones in areas when he travels, and while at home also. For instance, John is more astute in noticing PSEs where he did not notice them before in Soledad, like at parks or rest stops, and in Soledad's fitness centers. He and other informants also noted the ease at which they are able to identify and meet new gay people, like at the mall or in Soledad Center. Kevin suggested that developing "gay gaze" has made his appetite for experiencing gay life more insatiable. This is one of the reasons why Kevin wants to open up a gay coffee shop in Soledad. While chatting with Jack, an undergraduate who has recently started traveling to gay destinations like Miami, he explained (via a chat room) why developing a gay gaze was important to him: "I feel more confident, knowing there are people like me, people who like what I like. I feel more free 2 [to] act how I want 2[to]." Jack also pointed out that he was able to identify other gay men using his improved "gaydar".

Gaydar. Generally speaking, the more one is around gay people and in gay areas, the easier it becomes to recognize other gay people. As informants noted, their experiences socializing with gay people helped develop their gaydar. Gaydar is a word that the gay community uses which means "gay radar." Informants explained that gaydar is how they can sense if someone is gay or not. While some believe gaydar is just a

fictitious term, in reality it is based on a system of cues that enable a gay man to discern if someone is gay or not. Informants noted that gay men were more prone to identify other gay men because they more easily noticed characteristics that indicated if a man might be gay. Furthermore, many gay men felt that they were invisible to a majority of straight world, because the majority of the heterosexual society, especially straight men, may assume that most people are hetero. Gay men used the invisible nature of sexuality and manipulated these characteristics as a negotiation strategy for avoiding conflict. In a comparison, members of racial minorities often stick out because of the physical characteristics they possess. As Mikey noted, “You only notice what sticks out.”

There was an overall agreement among informants that gay men in Soledad often do not act upon their gaydar, even though they may have confidence in their abilities of determining if another man is gay or not. Franz suggested, “I think it is kind of interesting when you are traveling to look for new gay people.” He further noted that he would not be more inclined to talk to someone just because he was gay. Social interaction and disclosing one’s gay identity to a stranger is dependent on the context of the situation. In a perfect world, if a gay man thought another man was gay, he would not be afraid to talk to him and find out. However, in Soledad and areas that are not gay-friendly, the risks of being wrong may prevent gay men from acting on their hunches.

In some cases, using gaydar to identify other gay men is seen as a game. Hans explained, “Say we are out somewhere out of town, at the mall or the movies, and I see some gay people, and I’m with one of ya’ll (another gay person), I’ll say ‘look at that fag!’” Franz pitched in saying, “We talk about them...you are testing your skills, honing

your skills of identification.” Hans simplistically believed that in order to find gay people all you have to do is look:

It’s all right here (as he pointed to his eyes), because when you look at someone, like when...you can go anywhere and see a guy that is good-looking, but it is really all in the eyes, when you look at somebody and their eyes linger for a little while, and if it’s a guy, even if he is not out, [that] this guy is gay.

Another example of cues that can identify if someone is gay is their vernacular. John talked about being able to tell that the guy next to him on a plane ride was gay by the words he used. John noted, “Somehow I guess I started asking questions, and he was like, ‘I was there and will get picked up by my spouse.’” John noticed that his row-mate did not use the word “wife” and was being very gender neutral. At that point, John felt comfortable disclosing his sexuality, and the two started exchanging stories and information about gay subject matter, “he was like ‘boom’, he comes out and starts flaming⁹, and starts telling me where all the bars were, and what not to do in town. It was useful to know the nuances of the language.”

Other cues that informants used to judge whether or not someone was gay were visual, like certain brands of clothing, hair styles, colors of clothing, styles of backpacks/satchels, tight shirts, and types of sunglasses, just to name a few. Mikey also noted that he looks at the way people walk and what kind of hand gestures people use to help determine if someone is gay.

⁹ Flaming is a native term used by gay men meant to when another gay man is acting is acting stereotypically gay and effeminate.

Gaydar is useful, but the informants agreed that it is getting harder to tell gay and straight men apart. John stated, “The pressure to build up their bodies, to look good, used to be a gay arena only.” Sam, a graduate student who was raised in Haven, noted how straight men shave their arms, legs and chests at the gym where he works out. Other informants noticed how some straight guys pluck their eyebrows and wear make-up. Dressing in styles of clothing that predominantly only gay men used to wear is also very common. Sam further explained this phenomenon as, “Any type of cultural demarcation that gays take upon themselves to use as a way to identify each other eventually bleeds into the mainstream crowd.”

Not all gay men put stock in gaydar. Paul noted, “I am not a big believer, I don’t have a very good one, so I don’t know.” However, informants like Mick explained that having a bad gaydar is the result of lack of exposure. Mick explained, “I think that different groups of people are a lot more oblivious to it. I think that, generally, that straight males are a lot more oblivious to that than straight females. I think unless you come into contact with a gay person, it makes recognizing others easier.” Informants noted that they felt more confident trusting their gaydar in Soledad to tell gay men apart from the rest of a crowd. Furthermore, they felt slightly more comfortable acting upon their notions to meet these people who they identified as gay.

Making Friends away from Home

Many of informants noted how they made friends while away from Soledad during leisure travel, which has a direct impact on enlarging their network of social and

professional ties. Usually, the gay networks made by gay men are full of friends that were met at parties, bars, or on-line. The enlarged social network that gay men create in Soledad is very helpful for them because it increases their circle of friends, which is critical for gay men without many gay friends already. These friends help supply more diverse opportunities that would not be available to a gay man living in Soledad if he did not have outside friends. Having friends in Haven, or other cities, helped fill up the informants' social calendars. Also, having friends in outside cities makes the decision to travel to cities like Haven easier, because of lodging and having people with whom to socialize with upon arrival.

Likewise, friends made in other cities visited Soledad on occasion. While Soledad does not have a queer district or gay bar, gay men may travel to Soledad to attend parties or visit Soledad Center with their gay friends. Therefore, travel starts to occur in both directions, to Soledad and to Haven. This is one of the reasons why a new gay bar is being opened in Soledad. Friends of a Soledad local visited the community and noticed the need and opportunity for a gay bar. Because of their experiences operating gay bars in other towns and their financial resources, they decided to move to Soledad and open a gay bar.

It was also common for gay men living in Soledad to meet other gay men who live in Soledad for the first time while in a gay bar in another city. The foundation for future friendships may occur away from home, and once this contact is made, these gay men are more likely to keep in contact with each other upon their return to Soledad. A young gay man who moved back home to a larger city for the summer exclaimed, "I have

met so many fags here that go to [All American University].” This young gay man is now more eager to return to Soledad for school because of his new friends, even though he stated that he will miss living in a larger city because of the diverse opportunities to experience gay life he encountered.

A New Perspective

Gay men who are able to develop their gay gaze and use their instincts can more effectively make new gay friends and find Soledad easier to negotiate. Also, being able to relate to other gay men becomes easier the more their gay gaze is developed and the more they lose their fear of associating with other gay men. Developing friendships helps their social life become more satisfying, therefore helping gay men develop pride about their homosexuality. For instance, David explained:

I think as gay men [we] are a lot more open with one another, just because we are, like that saying ‘we are family’. Once you find people with things in common, I guess that it is a good basis to go from, I mean you have to deal with all of the same [things]...you have to make-up stories to your family, you all have similar treats against you. And of course, you have similar interests...We can always count on one another...those are things that you go to your [gay] friends for, your support group. So, I think that is a neat thing, a good quality about being gay. And there have been a couple of times I have been with my friends where we said that it would be boring to be a straight man.

Because the gay lifestyle can be mysterious and covert, inexperienced gay men may have a hard time accessing it, but it becomes easier the more experience they have under their belt and the stronger their gay gaze becomes. Without developing this gay gaze, making friends, enlarging their network, or developing tastes for different scenes, learning how to be a gay man or just being satisfied with one's life as an open gay man may be harder to accomplish.

Conclusion

Leisure travel is very useful in helping gay men come to terms with their sexuality. Once a gay man is free to meet other gay people, with the same tastes, orientations, and fears, he will feel less deviant and abnormal. Once his worries are put to rest, he will be more able to successfully cope with his homosexuality, and might eventually come totally out of the closet.

Travel out of Soledad to more relaxed social climates helped gay men express their sexuality safely. During leisure travel, they were able to experience the diverse opportunities that larger cities have, but there can be drawbacks, like hostility or feeling awkward because one is not acclimated to the gay lifestyle. Once they return to their home community from these queer experiences, they may feel a void in their lives, therefore wanting to return frequently to larger cities to find these opportunities to experience gay-related activities occur. Visiting queer districts or clubs helped informants develop their gay identity, meet new friends, and have other experiences that would wield powerful effects on them. Visiting gay or queer districts can help gay men

not only develop their identities, but once they are able to see the world through a gay gaze, it becomes easier for them to find these opportunities at home, even though these opportunities may be scarce or hidden. Leisure travel helps gay men in Soledad escape the stifling community that they live in, but it also helps them negotiate it with more confidence upon their return.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter discusses the findings of Chapter IV in light of the literature review and is divided into four sections. The first section summarizes the findings described in Chapter IV. The next section discusses this study's contribution to the leisure studies literature and the gay and lesbian literature. The third section outlines some of the limitations and delimitations of the study. The final section discusses the implications for gay travel and tourism research and suggests ideas for future research.

Overview of Findings

The process of developing a positive gay identity is difficult in stifling social climates found in small, southern towns, like Soledad. Furthermore, finding leisure outlets that affirm one's gay identity through freedom of expression are not as easily accessible in Soledad as they may be in larger, more progressive towns. Therefore, many of the gay and lesbian residents use leisure travel as negotiation strategy to the leisure constraints they encounter. The experiences the encounter during travel helps gay men negotiate their daily lives much more capably, while also helping having effects on their travel careers, or the extent and patterns of their leisure travel, as adults. For instance, becoming a circuit queen is a process that is started by taking small trips to bars and other festivities. After a while, tastes are developed and these tastes direct people to search for particular experiences.

The types of problems or constraints that the gay community generally experiences at home are based on perceived homophobia, fear of coming out of the closet/disclosure, lack of well-developed communications channels among members of the gay community, lack of mingling among diverse sub-groups, and lack of affirming gathering places (like a gay club); some of these constraints may not be specific to only gay men, but they may have unique interpretations of the same experience. Regardless, these constraints are major reasons that I was able to discern that made the social climate of Soledad stifling for members of the gay community. These constraints act like a push factor, pushing people away from home to find affirming, gay experiences.

The population as a whole is young in Soledad, because the community revolves around the large university found there. When students of All American University graduate, they move away from Soledad for the most part. This may partially explain why there is a lack of “young professionals” in the area. The more permanent, older gay residents stay in Soledad because of their respective careers, but find that building relationships is difficult with the younger crowd. Until Soledad is able to keep a more diverse population, in terms of age, older gay residents may feel like oddities at times, because their local network is thin and ineffective.

There are ways in which members of the gay community try to make their experience of meeting other gay people and living in a stifling community more tolerable. For instance, the gay community uses the internet to meet each other on a regular basis. In real time, gay men can seek out other gay men at certain hang-outs and can identify them by using a series of cues. Likewise, there are tearooms and PSEs that some men,

but not just men who identify themselves as gay, use as opportunities to find sex anonymously. Finally, there are loose channels of communication that keeps the community in-touch with each other.

Leisure travel is used as a negotiation strategy to find leisure opportunities that allow for freedom of expression. This travel is sometimes to queer districts where a gay man can relax, be within the boundaries of his community, and feel “at-home”. Gay clubs serve as the center of gay life in these districts. There is a diverse set of bars, clubs, and other establishments in larger cities from which a gay man can choose. Usually this choice is based on how similar his tastes concur with that of the establishment. It is within these places that other leisure opportunities arise and where friendships can arise. These leisure opportunities help gay men become more positive about their gay identity

Not all travel from Soledad is to gay centers, but gay men usually will notice and explore gay themes or opportunities while on travel. Likewise, harassment still occurs inside and outside the boundaries of gay/queer centers. Sometimes the harassment comes from the hetero-normative society, but occasionally this harassment, or feeling uncomfortable, comes from within the gay community. As far as avoiding harassment from outside the gay culture, many gay men use their invisibility to blend into society. In other words, some gay men are able to shut-off any aspects of their stereotypical gay characteristics or nuances to just seem like another, “normal” person.

Discussion of Findings

It is necessary to state that this research attempted to uncover any unique constraints that gay men during leisure travel. Having said this, it is also necessary to state that many of the leisure constraints that gay men experienced when living in a small town may also be experienced by other groups, including members of mainstream groups, however, this group did not include any in-depth interviews of heterosexual people, so it would be hard to state what commonalities there may be. The original plan of this research was to interview gay men that volunteered for the study, regardless of where they resided, but after interviewing the initial informants who coincidentally all lived Soledad, it was believed that by focusing on the experiences of gay men living Soledad, a richer story could emerge. This flexibility helped improve the study immensely. However, the literature review was compiled in a manner that was intended to cover materials on leisure constraints, travel, and gay men; the literature does not delve into many qualitative studies like this one, partially due to their lack of prominence in the literature. Therefore, this research can best serve as a guide to future research. Furthermore, I believe that more ethnographic studies on this population can be helpful for creating a deeper understanding of the social processes this group goes through.

Concerning the topic of leisure constraints, many of the gay men in Soledad encountered the broad constraints that previous research has presented, such as lack of time or money. However, one topic that particularly stood out are the constraints created by the roles informants felt they must fulfill. For instance, informants noted the constraints they felt from not knowing how to fulfill their roles as a brother, son, or

boyfriend, or what ever the case may be. During the “coming out” process, many informants felt guilt from the contrasting roles that conflicted with each other. For example, what does it mean to be a good son and a good boyfriend at the same time, knowing that a good son would not be homosexual in the first place? In some cases, the ways informants negotiated these constraints in ways that were against their morals, like lying to parents or friends, because informants felt obligated to “keep the peace” and not upset anyone. Examples of questions that must be addressed are: Did informants fully negotiate the constraints they encountered, was it avoidance or accommodation? And how does this phenomenon differ from other individual’s or sub-group’s experiences?

In the leisure travel literature, I found that some of the past beliefs of gay travelers and the gay population were treated superficially. Some marketers and researchers argued that gay men were equally likely to travel because they were similar in terms of propensity to travel, likes, motivations, income, etc. However, more recent research, including this research, argues that these beliefs are skewed. The gay population is very diverse in terms of race, age, levels of income, tastes and preferences. Painting the gay population in broad strokes does not adequately present the complexity of daily life.

Finally, this research will help to develop queer theory and gay and lesbian studies. This study can further help understand how and why gay men pursue travel, tourism, and leisure, and more specifically, how these activities help deconstruct the hetero-normative society in which gay people are forced to live within. Furthermore, while feminism was useful perspective in which to organize this study, a gay/homosexual perspective, whether called queer theory or gay and lesbian studies, could possibly be

even more useful in helping serve as a critique of existing research, a correction of the biases that have existed, and the groundwork for the transformation of social science and society. This study can help advance a gay/homosexual perspective for future studies. In the future, studies that relate to gay men living in specified areas and leisure travel may be better studied as two separate phenomena: a study of community and the role of travel in terms of creating new experiences for those who undertake leisure travel. Performing future studies with a more specific focus may help uncover many of the gaps and questions that this research did not.

Limitations of Study

This study is limited in its generalizability in explaining the use of leisure travel by the gay population as a whole, since it focused on the experiences of informants that lived in a southern, rural community. It may not be possible to generalize the findings of this study to other communities. However, the findings in this study provide ideas for future research in leisure and gay and lesbian studies, especially in regards to smaller, communities where the social climate is less relaxed than larger, progressive cities. Additionally, future comparative studies may reveal common characteristics of the use of leisure travel as a negotiation strategy to achieve positive, affirming leisure outlets.

A second limitation is that my research reflects my biases and assumptions about the subject at hand. I started this research having already experienced the gay lifestyle and life in Soledad as a member of this minority group. These experiences shaped the direction this research project took. The information that I have provided regarding

leisure and the gay population of this community is by no means the only perspective nor does it include all possible permutations of these contexts. What I was able to do was present was one point of view and experience of life and leisure in Soledad. Other researchers who examine Soledad, or other communities that share similar characteristics, may find different elements to examine or include which may not be present in my study.

A third limitation that may limit this study is the process of recruiting informants. The Institutional Review Board of the Texas A&M University suggested that the sampling technique change from me actively identifying informants, originally planned in my purposive sampling technique, to a modified snowball technique. The IRB suggested that informants contact me if they wished to join the study, as opposed to me contacting people whose names were given to me as possible informants. Although I am pleased with the quality of the informants, I was handcuffed from the beginning in taking a proactive role in gathering data.

A delimitation of my study stems from the role that I had as a participant observer, which changed the manner in which I was able to address my research questions. In retrospect, I would have attended more festivals, gatherings, and events within the gay community. For instance, it may have been helpful to attend a Gay Pride event, but due to the timing of my research, no such opportunities were available. Likewise, at times it is hard to keep being a participant and an observer as concurrent roles. When attending events such as circuit parties, that have a very Carnival-type atmosphere, it became difficult to take a step back, analyze and observe my surroundings. I was unable to interview other participants due to this rapid movement. While I am sure

that I missed wonderful opportunities and resources during my field work, a participant observer is only able to report what he/she saw.

Implications of Findings

The qualitative approach used in this study should be continued in other studies of gay men. Given this analysis of the homosexual subculture in Soledad in regards to leisure, this research suggests ethnographic and qualitative approaches should be continued, because of the insightful gains in knowledge that may be difficult to gather using quantitative methods. Also, as noted earlier, future studies should also be careful against concluding that the culture of the group being studied is representative of the greater subculture. Rather, the research should be focused on uncovering linkages among different groups within the greater subculture, what kinds of information are transmitted and how they are disseminated, the type and extent of self-identification that gay men have with the greater whole, and what role leisure plays in these processes. This is consistent with Fine's (1978) suggestions about the re-conceptualization of youth culture.

Also, researchers must be aware and examine the sources of the knowledge that members acquire, and what role membership in other groups plays in this process. This study only examined the membership that gay men had in the gay subculture, but the concept of interlocking group networks is useful when understanding subcultures, as Fine (1978) suggested. By observing one or several groups of gay men while focusing on the nature and extent of their leisure, their networks of communications with those inside and

outside of their circle, and the cultural content of this subculture we can gain insight into the boundaries of the subculture of homosexual people.

The way the findings in this study nicely fits with Graham's typology of tourism by gay people is pleasing. Many examples show how the degree of one's outness is related to the type of tourism (homosexual, gay, or queer) they undertake, but this is not always true. For example, gay men who are not out of the closet at all, or those who are in some aspects but hide this characteristic of themselves may be more prone to homosexual tourism, as defined by Graham. However, I find that a vast majority of leisure travel or tourism by gay men can be better defined as gay tourism, because they did not always travel to very marginalized places in order to feel comfortable expressing themselves. In terms of gay bars or districts, gay men traveled to locations that shared seamless borders with the straight world; this was true also in the stifling home community, where gay men, whether closeted or not, confronted the hetero world on their own terms in the midst of heterosexual space. However, the confrontations that come from these encounters may have both positive and negative ramifications. In terms of leisure travel as a negotiation strategy to the mainstream hegemonic ideologies found in Soledad, all tourism can be seen a queer tourism, because travel by gay people can be seen as a form of celebration and co-presence, and defiance. However, I did see any evidence of gay men trying to break the homosexual/heterosexual dichotomy consciously or actively, all I saw were gay men trying to live the best way they knew how, and in some cases, learning as they went. On the other hand, I do agree with the idea that gay men were able to re-interpret the cultural productions that they encountered during their

leisure travel. I present the Gay Days at Disney World as a great example of this, an event where gay men are able to transform this legendary hetero space into a gay destination. This example may also be seen as an example of gays taking over space, as opposed to the co-presence talked about in Graham's work. Maybe it can be found that gay people do not want to share space in the first place? While some gay men preferred to remain invisible and covert, others actively tried to be noticed. Is it possible that Graham's typology of the different types of tourism be expanded to better define them.

Exploring labeling processes would be beneficial to the leisure field as well. Because society, in general, defines homosexual people as a social category about which generalizations can be made, most members of that category come to think of themselves in relation to stereotypes offered by the most powerful in that society. As Fine (1978) suggested, identification with peers leads persons to adopt the behavior patterns and artifacts characteristic of the opinion leaders of their group.

Finally, it is necessary to see if these results are similar to those in other small cities. For example, it would be of interest to see the extent to which leisure travels helps gay men in other cities develop their gay identities. Furthermore, it would be interesting to see what other motivations spur leisure travel for gay men and find the other benefits that leisure travel affords gay men. Likewise, it would be helpful to understand other negotiation strategies gay men utilize to overcome leisure constraints, and develop an greater understanding how leisure affects the lives of gay men

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EXPERIENCE

USDA/HLPANR, College Station, TX (February 2003-Present)
 Graduate Fellow

- Conducting research projects that will positively affect USDA policy, practices, and philosophy while I pursue my Ph.D.

Texadelphia, College Station, TX (June 2000-January 2003)
 General Manager

- Hired to solely manage all aspects of this restaurant, including overseeing employees, budgets, advertising, and maintenance; I exceed all job responsibilities.

SierraQuest Corporation, San Marcos, TX (October 1995-September 1998)
 Co-owner/Head Guide

- My organization catered to diverse groups seeking experiential education in the outdoors.
- Designed distinctive recreation programs to meet the needs of our clients.
- Traveled extensively; worked with many distinctive personalities and cultures.

Rocky River Ranch, Wimberly, TX (Summer 1996)
 Camp Director

- Hired and trained staff member to meet specific needs of this summer camp.